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WESTERN STORY

MAY 15, '43

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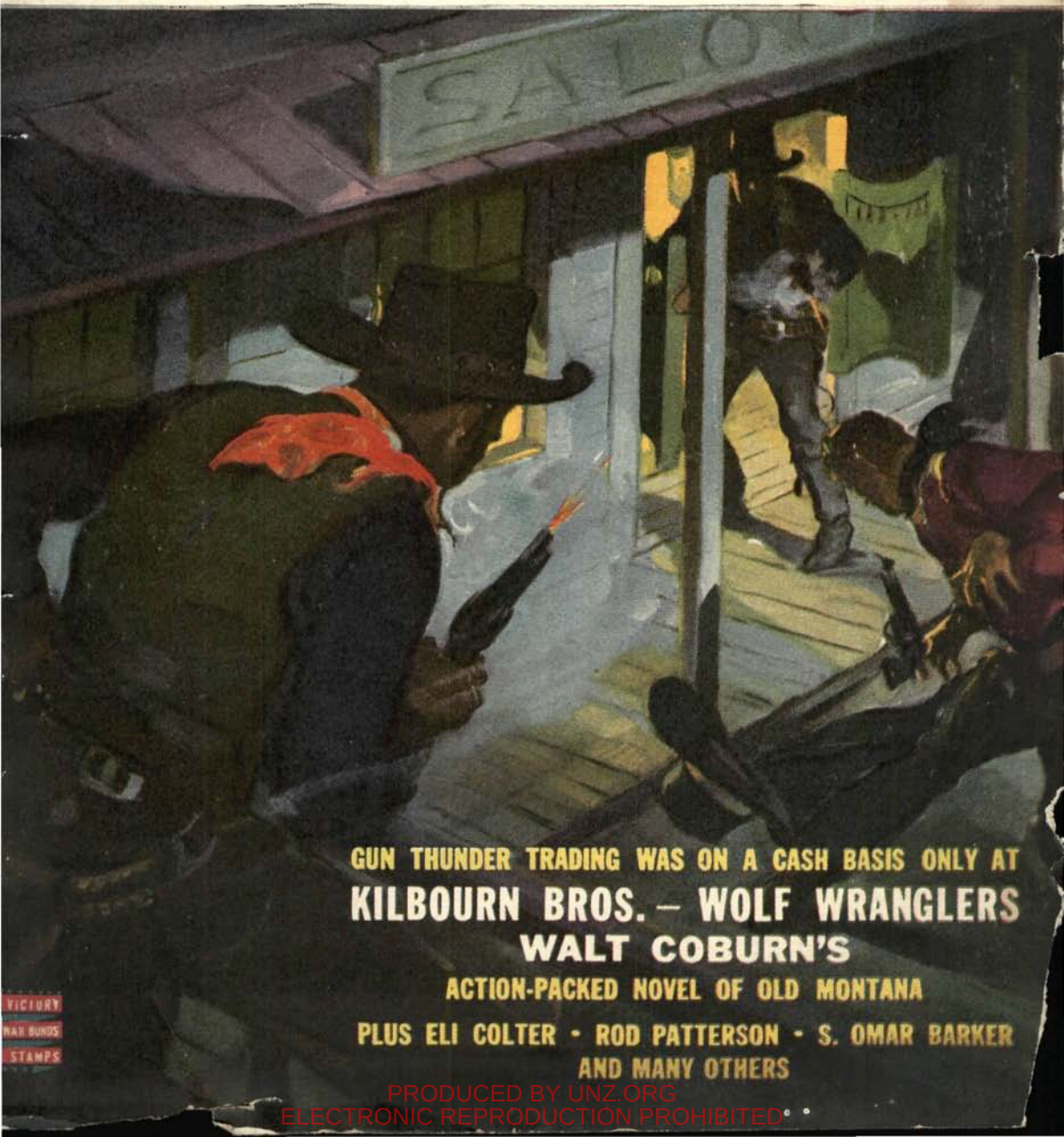

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WESTERN STORY

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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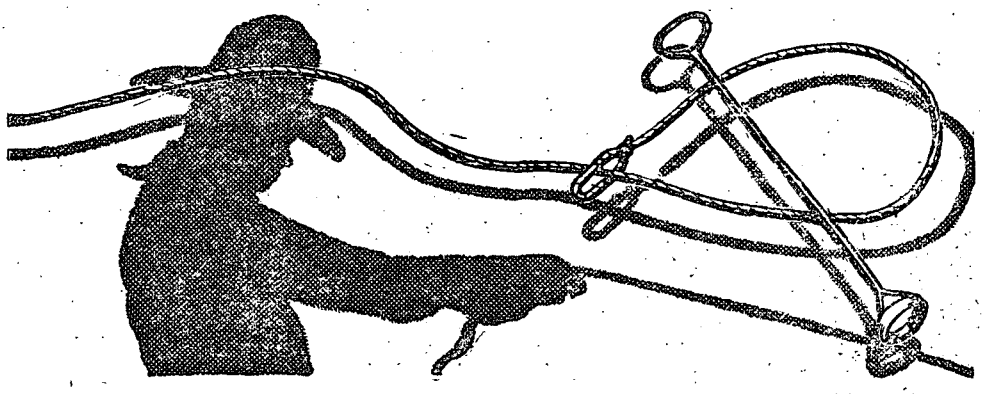

The Roundup

We got a letter from an old-timer the other day, complaining about the late delivery of some issues of Western Story. Inasmuch as this is a pretty important matter, particularly to you top hands who follow the W. S. serials, we're going to let you hear from Mr. Clarence Alford of Detroit, Michigan, before we say anything. Writes Mr. Alford:

I have been reading Western Story for twenty years and think it is the best ever, but lately something has gone wrong. In the last few months the delivery has been awful. Once during November an issue of Western Story was not delivered to the newsstands. During January the January 30th issue was not delivered and I missed the last installment of Peter Dawson's swell serial, TRAIL BOSS. They delivered, instead, the February 6th issue. Then, when the February 13th issue was supposed to be delivered, they delivered some more of the February 6th issue.

And that isn't all. The next issue of Western Story was dated March 20th!

How can a reader follow serials unless he can get the magazines in the correct order?

That, Mr. Alford, is a difficult question to answer. But had you been able to get the February 13th issue you would have seen the announcement on Page 8, explaining the important change in Western Story's size and the reason for it. For the benefit of you and others who either missed that issue or overlooked the announcement we'll explain again.

Because of our country's drastic need for the conservation of paper and because of increasing transportation difficulties, Western Story now comes to you once every other week instead of weekly as before. However, to compensate for the change in the frequency of issue, Western Story's size has been increased. The

Continued on page 126

In the next Western Story—Guncat Bodman, that lightning-triggered segundo of the law, makes a thrilling return appearance in W. Ryerson Johnson's fast-action novel, LORD OF THE OWLHOOT; Bennett Foster will be on hand with WINCHESTER CUT, a dramatic novelette of the cattle country; and there'll be a top string of stories, features and departments by Norman A. Fox, Tom W. Blackburn, Eric Howard, Allan Vaughan Elston and many other favorites.

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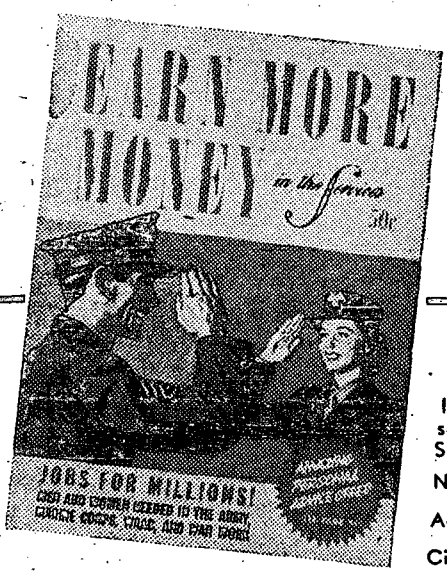

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THE SHERIFF HIRES A HAND

Jim hurled the bottle and followed it with his boot. Then he lunged forward, just as King's gun cleared leather.

by Eric Howard

JIM DODSON saw the sheriff approaching from across the dusty street. He was standing there, apart from other men, at the side of the loading platform before the big store, waiting for a word with the cattleman, Dick Prentice. Jim had something to say to Prentice, in private. It would probably land him a job on the big Prentice ranch fifteen miles south of Mesa City.

As the sheriff veered toward him, Jim half turned, pulled his hat down and hunched his shoulders. The

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sheriff might pass him up, but Jim was pretty sure that the lawman had recognized him. In that case, there was no use moving, no use walking toward his horse. If the sheriff wanted to talk to him, he'd have to listen.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jim studied the broad-shouldered, stocky officer. The sheriff was a man of about fifty; he had put on weight, his hair was iron-gray, his face lined and bronzed. But there was power in his heavy body, and he moved with the sureness of one who had always been active. He was no office sheriff; he was a man who had ridden hard trails.

Jim had heard his name. Lawson, Tom Lawson. In his youth, it was said, Lawson had been a ranger. Then he had ranched it for a time, until a savage, bitter range feud had brought him out of retirement. He still owned a big cattle outfit, somewhere near the Prentice ranch; but this real job now was to keep the peace in and around Mesa City.

Jim Dodson sighed wearily. Thinned down to a hundred and sixty pounds of hard muscle, he was so tall that he looked gaunt. Through his worn shirt, you could see that he was bone and sinew, with no fat. The past two months had done that to him.

Some of Prentice's men, loading a big wagon, saw that the sheriff was walking up to the stranger. Curious, they stopped work and watched. But the sheriff stepped close to Jim, put a hand on his arm, and said under his breath: "Let's step aside, friend. I'd like a word with you."

Jim was surprised by the lawman's deep, friendly tone. Most officers he had encountered lately had snapped commands at him or shouted harsh orders. He had found so little friendliness on his long trail that he responded to it, in spite of himself.

"Sure thing," he agreed. They walked down the street together and the Prentice men resumed their work.

The sheriff paused before a vacant store building and stood in the shade. He took a bag of tobacco out of his shirt pocket and offered it to Jim. The lean cowboy built a smoke, murmured his thanks.

Taking his time, the sheriff also rolled a cigarette. Not until he had taken a long puff did he speak.

Then, looking directly into Jim's eyes, he asked: "Your name Dodson?"

Jim nodded, waited.

THE sheriff took another puff and then spoke slowly, almost reluctantly.

"Read about what happened, up north," he said. "Heard about it from gents passin' through. It was a mean, dirty bus'ness an' I can appreciate how you feel. If anybody had done the same to me—killed two o' my brothers, dynamited an' burned my store, the way they done to you—I'd want to hunt 'em down, too. Also heard what you've been doin'. Got two of 'em, so far, huh? Can't say I blame you. But you'll appreciate my position. I don't want any killin's in Mesa City."

"They weren't killin's," Jim said. "Self-defense, both times."

"I heard as much. But you didn't stay to get yourself cleared. Some claim different. Some claim you killed in cold blood."

"So you're goin' to lock me up, send me back?"

The sheriff shook his head, pursed his lips. "No. I'm just askin' you to ride, out o' town, out o' my bailiwick. I've got no official word that you're wanted, but I aim to prevent

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bloodshed around here. Your trail led you here. Huntin' somebody?"

"Huntin' a job," Jim said. "That's all. Figgered on speakin' to Prentice. Fact is, I've got to work, get a stake, before I can do anything else."

The sheriff peered at him, his eyes narrowed. He took in Dodson's gaunt appearance, the lines that etched age into his youthful face, the strained look in his eyes.

"How long since you ate?" he asked.

"Seems like a week," admitted Jim.

"You didn't trail some man here?" the sheriff demanded. "You ain't ridin' the vengeance road?"

"I lost the trail," Jim said. "I only come here 'cause I need to lay up a while. Heard Prentice might take on a man."

"Prentice is full up. Just hired two hands. Come with me up to the Chinaman's."

They crossed the street, passed the sheriff's office and went on to the eating place. Jim Dodson pushed his hat back and ordered a meal. The sheriff sat on a stool beside him, drinking coffee, glancing at Jim now and then.

"I'll put you to work on my ranch," the sheriff said, at last. "Give you a note to my foreman. You can ride on down there today. The chuck's good an' you'll fatten up some."

"Thanks," Jim said heartily. "I'll be able to earn my pay after a few meals like this. Only you may be takin' a chance, sheriff. If any of the gents I've been trailin' show up around here, they might get the idea you're on my side."

"Let 'em!" the sheriff grunted. "It ain't up to me to ask questions, but what was back o' all that trouble?"

JIM lifted his coffee cup, took a sip and stared straight ahead. When he spoke, his voice was cold and hard.

"A man named King sold my brothers that store," he said. "They always had a hankerin' to run a store. Different from me, that way. They made a down payment, aimin' to pay off out o' the business. Trouble started, then. All kinds o' trouble. They got wise to what King was up to. He still held their notes for the balance. They found out he had sold that store over an' over, always gettin' it back. But the boys, Ned an' Dan, didn't aim to quit. They saw what they had to do—pay off King in full, get rid o' him. Oh, he stayed out o' sight, hired a few gunmen to do the dirty work. Well, they raised the necessary money; I put up some, and friends o' theirs backed 'em. This King had no idea they could raise the money. He was madder'n sin when they paid up. They thought he'd quit then. But he didn't. He kept on, tryin' to break 'em. They fought back. King went crazy, then, I reckon. That was the windup, that night they broke in an' cut loose. Shot Ned an' Dan, then dynamited the buildin' an' set it afire. The story started that it was an accident, but the sheriff dug their bodies out. Both had been shot in the back. I wasn't there. When I got there, that's what I heard."

"You know this man King, if you saw him?"

"Yeah," Jim answered. "An' a couple of the others. I took after 'em. Got nowhere. Ran into two strangers, found out they were King's men. They were the ones I shot. Had to, or they'd have got me. Then the trail ran out on me. I was broke an' hungry, so I knew

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I had to lay up somewhere—get a job an' raise a stake."

"An' then?" the sheriff inquired. "Take the trail again?"

Jim Dodson looked at him. "What else?" he asked.

The sheriff made no reply. He dropped some coins on the counter, slid off the stool and moved to the door. Jim followed him.

A little later Jim was riding out of town. Sheriff Lawson had written a note to his foreman, telling him to put Jim to work. Jim had the note in his shirt pocket.

Ahead of him, on the road, Jim saw Prentice's big wagon rolling along. Beyond the wagon, he caught sight of Prentice's riders. He made no effort to overtake the wagon. His horse was as trail worn as himself. Jim Dodson was used to solitude and it was just as well, he thought, that he was going to work for Sheriff Lawson instead of Dick Prentice. He hadn't been eager to ask Prentice for a job. He knew Prentice's younger brother, and on the strength of that he had thought the cattleman might take him on. But it was better this way. The sheriff knew who he was, seemed willing to take a chance on him.

Jim decided that the sheriff was a mighty square man. He had taken a liking to him. Very few men in his position would have made a place for a drifter under the same circumstances. As Jim had remarked, the sheriff was taking a chance. Should Rufe King discover where he was, trouble might develop. King must know that Dodson was on his trail. However long it took, wherever it led, King must know that Jim would follow that trail.

King might be trailing him. Or, more likely, he might have sent some of his men to get Jim.

SUDDENLY, as Jim watched the heavy wagon roll along, a thought stuck him. The sheriff had said that Prentice had just hired two men. Somehow, Jim had got the impression that they were strangers, drifters like himself. He wondered, now, if they could be members of King's gang, if they were looking for him. He checked back over his travels. Had he anywhere mentioned his destination, his intention of working for Prentice? Only once, he recalled; he had told an old chuck-wagon cook, who now ran a small beanery in a little town. But Barney, the cook, was not one to talk. He was an old friend of Jim's.

Jim dismissed the thought and studied the country he was passing through. When he had ridden some ten miles, at an easy walk, the wagon rolled on to the south. His road, to the Lawson ranch, turned to the west. He went on alone.

Headquarters didn't look like much. The buildings were old and weather-beaten. But Jim saw plenty of evidence of prosperity. The sheriff's ranch was a money maker.

He handed his note to a tall, bony man about the sheriff's age who seemed to be in charge.

"I'm Jed Lee," the latter said. "The boss says to feed you up. *Bueno!* There's the bunkhouse. We'll eat soon."

Jim met the rest of the crew in the bunkhouse and at the table. The sheriff had picked his men carefully; they were good men and good workers. Jim knew he would get along with them.

The next day Jim rode out with Jed Lee to get the lay of the land. Jed had idly suggested that he take it easy for a few days. They rode to the east. Shortly before noon

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they met five of Dick Prentice's riders and stopped to talk.

Jed Lee knew only three of the others; two were new men, the men Prentice had lately hired. Jim glanced at them as Jed said: "My new man is Jim Dodson."

Jim waved his hand, smiled and said: "Howdy."

The two new Prentice men did not smile. Some instinctive sense of danger shot a warning up Jim's spine. One of the men was looking at him intently out of piercing black eyes.

He was right, then. The new men were strangers. They knew who he was. More than likely, they were followers of Rufe King. They had the mark of the lawless on them. They were not like the sheriff's riders or the other Prentice men. They kept to themselves, a little apart from the others, and didn't join in the easy, friendly range talk.

After a few minutes of conversation Jed Lee said he had work to do. He and Jim rode off together and the Prentice men cut across the flat in the opposite direction. Jim turned and glanced after them. The two new Prentice men were looking at him.

"Prentice hired him a pair, this time," Lee drawled. "Them two don't look good to me."

He was looking at Jim as he spoke, with a question in his eyes. But Jim remained poker-faced, merely nodding his agreement. He wondered if Jed knew him, had heard of what he'd been through. If he had, apparently it didn't make any difference.

As they rode on, Jed outlined work to be done during the next few days.

"I'll send you up here with Happy Conover," he told Jim. "You two oughta get along first rate. You can mend fence all along here."

Jim nodded again. Happy Conover was an amiable young puncher, friendly and likable. Jim could get along with him, all right.

He kept thinking about Prentice's two new hands. Maybe he was getting spooky, but he felt sure they were members of Rufe King's gang. King and some of his other followers might be holed up, somewhere nearby. In any case, Jim expected trouble from the two new Prentice men.

For several days, however, as he worked with Happy, nothing happened. They strung wire, reset posts, and worked together as though they had been doing so for years. Happy was always cheerful, a willing worker; he was usually whistling or humming as he worked and when he talked he didn't show any curiosity about Jim or where he had come from.

Happy prided himself on his marksmanship and liked to show off. With six-shooter or saddle gun, he was a mighty good shot. Jim refused to compete with him, saying he was beaten before he started.

On the fifth working day, Jim was alone along the line fence. Happy had ridden back to headquarters for some tools he had forgotten. Jim was working with pliers down near a fenced waterhole when he heard hoofbeats.

Looking up, he saw one of the new Prentice men riding up to him. Jim went on working until the man was about ten feet away. Then he looked up and said: "Howdy."

"Ain't I seen you up north somewhere?" the man asked.

"I've been around," Jim admitted. "Why?"

The mounted man stared at him steadily. He slowly nodded his head.

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Then he swung down from his saddle and dropped his reins to the ground. Jim went on working, but watched the man out of the corner of his eye.

Suddenly the rider's gun was out and covering Jim.

"I place you now," he said, as he leveled the gun at Jim. "You're wanted for a pair o' killings. Funny Sheriff Lawson hired you. Reckon he hadn't got your description when he did. But there's a reward on you, feller, an' I aim to collect it."

Jim twisted a wire into place. "You're wrong," he drawled. "I had to shoot a couple o' skunks up north, but everybody knows it was self-defense. Nobody's offerin' a reward on them two."

"They had friends. There's a price on your head. Turn around, get your hands up. I'm takin' you back."

Jim started to obey. He half turned but kept watching the other man closely. The latter relaxed slightly; the barrel of his gun dropped a fraction of an inch as he stepped forward. Jim pivoted, hurled the pliers at his head, and at the same instant dropped to the ground, clawing at his gun.

His aim was good. He hit the black-eyed man on the forehead with the pliers, stunning him so that he didn't shoot. Neither did Jim. Almost at the moment that his gun cleared leather, a weight fell upon him. The hard case's partner had sneaked up and jumped Jim from behind. Now he swung his gun against the side of Jim's head, and the lean cowboy flattened out, unconscious.

WHEN Jim came to, it was to the creak of saddle leather, with a painful throbbing in his head. He was lying across his own saddle, riding down a narrow trail into a deep canyon. One man, the heavy, powerful fellow who had knocked him out, rode just ahead. The other followed.

Where he was, Jim didn't know. But the position of the sun told him that three or four hours had passed. Happy Conover would have returned to the fence line and found him gone. If Happy read the sign there, he might be able to figure out what had happened.

Happy might go back to headquarters, tell Jed Lee what was up. More likely, he would take the trail himself, follow Jim and his captors, and walk into a trap. Happy was self-confident, reckless, almost to the point of folly.

Jim twisted around from his awkward position athwart the saddle and looked at the black-eyed man. There could be no point to this attack upon him unless they were taking him to Rufe King. The latter must be hiding out somewhere on this range. It would be like King to send two of his men to capture Dodson, instead of meeting him in person. Rufe liked to play it safe. But Rufe knew that so long as Jim Dodson lived and was able to ride, he would stick to the vengeance road. The country wasn't big enough for both of them, alive.

Jim judged that this deep canyon was in the forest range that lay back of the sheriff's and the Prentice outfits. He caught a glimpse of Wildcat Peak, a landmark, and was not surprised when the man ahead swung across a little stream to an open flat on the other side. The cold water was flung up into Jim's face. It cleared his head, made him feel better.

He saw, then, a tumble-down cabin built against a cliff. The thick-shouldered man ahead of him

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swung down from the saddle, grunted and moved back to Jim. The other hard case, the one with the piercing black eyes, also dismounted and walked forward. Jim was jerked to the ground. For a moment he felt faint and dizzy.

The black-eyed man whistled sharply. Jim stared at the cabin. The door swung open and Rufe King stepped outside.

King was a fat man with a broad, pale face and a head of curly red hair. He was smiling now and his eyes seemed almost lost in folds of fat. He walked down to the others, rubbing his hands together.

"Good work, boys," he said approvingly. "Anybody know about this?"

"No, Rufe," the heavy man replied. "Dodson was workin' alone, mendin' fence, when we tackled him. It was easy, considerin' his rep as a dangerous hombre."

"You leave any sign there?" King asked. "Think anybody might pick up the trail, come after him?"

"We fixed that pretty good. Even if anybody followed for a way, they'd soon lose the trail."

King nodded. "Take him inside, then. Soon as we've got him where we want him, you boys can go on back to Prentice's. This is goin' to work out good. Prentice don't suspicion nothin'?"

"Shucks, no. Everything's goin' fine."

"And what we heard about Prentice—"

"That's right, too," the heavy man said. "We located his safe already. Blacky spotted him puttin' the dinero in it. It's right in his office. In the floor, under an Indian rug."

"Yeah," said the black-eyed man. "There's a little loose section of the floor he pulls up. Then the safe's under that. I got a good look at it. It'll be a cinch to open."

RUFE KING nodded and gestured. The other two men took hold of Jim's arms and propelled him toward the cabin. He was still unsteady, and he stumbled as he walked.

Jim was trying to think clearly, to make sense out of the little he had heard. He began to see that these men intended somehow to tie him into a robbery of Prentice. The cattleman had money in his office safe; King's gun-slicks were going to crack that safe and loot it. But meanwhile they were posing as loyal hands before Prentice. Rufe King had planned the whole thing. King had somehow got on Jim's trail, had followed him here. When the sheriff had given Jim a job, that had conveniently fitted in with King's plans. So had his discovery that Prentice kept money in his own safe.

Jim knew what to expect. Rufe King would not let him live. More than that, King would make it appear that Dodson had had a hand in the Prentice robbery. Then those who claimed Jim had killed in cold blood would sway the opinion of others. Even some of Jim's friends might conclude that he had taken the owlhoot trail.

Inside the cabin, Jim was thrust down on a bedroll on the floor against the wall. He lay on his back, relaxed, and watched the others.

The man called Blacky moved over to a wooden box on the floor and reached for a whiskey bottle. He took a long drink. Rufe King and the heavy man, who was called Jig, stood close together, talking in low tones. After a time, Rufe nodded and gestured.

"Let's go, Blacky," Jig said.

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"Don't want to be too long away from Prentice."

"You sure you can open that safe?" asked King.

"Sure," Blacky said confidently. "I know the make. It's easy. I've opened lots of 'em."

"We're set, then," Rufe agreed. "But work careful. Don't take any chances. That sheriff might get wise to somethin' if he saw you two."

"He wouldn't know us if he did," declared Blacky. "No pictures of us anywhere. That's one place you went wrong, Rufe, gettin' your picture took."

"Nobody's lookin' for me," Rufe said, annoyed. "No lawman, anyway. All right, you know what to do. Take this feller's horse. You know where to put it. An' show up again here—"

"Want us to hogtie your friend 'fore we leave?" Blacky asked.

"I can take care of him," grunted King. "Get goin'."

The two men nodded and walked out. King didn't follow them. He sat down on an upturned box and looked at Jim. He shifted his gun-belt around. Jim heard the movement of horses outside.

Tonight probably they would pull the robbery. Then they'd come here, split with Rufe, and take care of Jim. After that Jig and Blacky might even return to the Prentice ranch. When the cattleman discovered that his safe had been opened, he'd probably call in the sheriff. With Jim missing, the sheriff might suspect that he had committed the robbery. He would certainly remember that Jim had intended to ask Prentice for a job.

Again Jim thought of Happy Conover. He was sure that Happy would try to trail him and almost hoped he wouldn't succeed, because if Happy ran into Jig and Blacky they might easily get the best of him.

TURNING his head slightly, Jim looked directly into Rufe King's small eyes. The cabin door was still open and a shaft of light fell full upon King. It gave his dead-white skin a sickly look.

King's thick lips twisted and he spat.

"Know what's goin' to happen to you, huh?" he said. "Your brothers made me plenty o' trouble, an' you followed up. Reckon you know I won't let you get away, this time."

"If you can help it, you won't," Jim agreed. "Play everything safe, don't you? Like when you had my brothers shot in the back and dynamited their store."

"Had nothin' to do with that," rasped King. "They were mean jaspers, antagonized everybody same as they did me. They got what was comin' to them. Not from me, though. Then you come along, actin' mean an' tough, huntin' me down. Just a killer. Killed two o' my friends, aimed to kill me. But I outsmarted you. I got on your trail 'way back. Knowing it was you or me, you bein' a killer, I fixed it my way. Stacked the cards. This Prentice is another mean jasper. So I aim to take him down a peg, too. What you s'pose he'll think when he finds you dead here, with some of the dinero out o' his safe? Huh? What you s'pose the sheriff will think? An' everybody else?"

Jim Dodson yawned as he looked at Rufe King. "They'll think just what you want 'em to think," he admitted. "That I robbed Prentice an' got shot in a fight with my pards."

"Yeah!" Rufe said. "Yeah, that's what they'll think."

"Your friends taken my horse

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over to Prentice's, huh?" Jim went on. "Make it look like I was there? That it? Then they'll show up here with the swag an' you'll split. You must be sure of them."

"I am. Good boys, both of 'em."

"Good for hangin'. But the sheriff has already spotted 'em. He knows their kind. What's more, my pard, Happy Conover, will be trailin' me 'fore long."

"Let him," grunted Rufe. "He comes here, I'll lay him out right alongside you."

Jim moved. King nervously reached for his gun. Jim laughed. Sitting up, his back to the wall, he sought tobacco and papers in his shirt pockets. He had none.

"Give me a smoke, Rufe," he said.

"I'll give you nothin'," King snarled.

Jim ran his hands through his hair. His mouth was dry. He still felt shaky. But he was sizing Rufe King up carefully. That quick, nervous gesture toward his gun meant a lot. King was on edge. Even if he was the head of the gang, he wasn't as dangerous as Blacky or Jig.

Jim stood up and started toward the corner of the room.

"Stay where you are!" Rufe commanded.

Jim kept his back turned. "I reckon it's too early for you to shoot me," he said. "Might not fit in with your plans. Meanwhile, I'm goin' to wet my whistle with that rotgut Jig sampled."

He reached down into the box, picked up the whiskey bottle and put it to his lips. He had turned and was facing Rufe.

"This stuff makes me wild, like an Injun," he said pleasantly. "If I should empty this bottle, I might overlook that gun you're totin' an' cut your gizzard out."

As he drank, he watched King warily. The fat man had risen. He had his hand on the butt of his gun.

The liquor warmed Jim. He moved back to the bedroll, taking the bottle with him, and dropped down. He looked mockingly at King.

"Wouldn't make any diff'rence to me," King declared, "whether I finish you now or later."

"Yes, it would," Jim corrected him. "You want to be sure, first, that Jig an' Blacky pull off the Prentice job. You don't want to stick around here, alone, with a dead man on your hands—in case the sheriff or Happy Conover show up. On top o' that, I figger you for a yellow dog that always gets somebody else to do the killin'. That's how it was with my brothers. I hear you even claim you wasn't in town when that happened. Who did shoot 'em? Jig, likely. I'm bettin' I stay alive till Jig an' Blacky get back here—if they do."

"They'll get back, all right."

Jim laughed. Pulling off one of his boots, he reached into it. The lining had loosened and was wadded up at the heel, hurting his foot. He pulled the lining out. Absorbed in what he was doing, he seemed to be ignoring Rufe. But he was on the alert, thinking hard.

If Happy Conover or the sheriff should come here, Jim knew that Rufe would shoot to kill. Happy had boasted as much of his skill as a tracker as of his marksmanship. Jim felt sure that sooner or later Happy would trail him to the cabin.

He decided that now was as good a time as any for a showdown. He wouldn't have a better chance. If he tackled King now, he might save Happy from getting shot.

True, King had a gun. But Jim had a whiskey bottle and a boot. If

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he hurled them both at Rufe, if he had any luck at all, Rufe probably wouldn't get more than one shot in.

Squatting on his heels, Jim pretended to be working on his boot. He saw Rufe clasp his hands across his paunch, calculated how long it would take him to draw his gun, and figured it could give him time enough for what he had to do.

"There's a nail in this boot," he complained. "Got a hammer here?"

"No," said Rufe. "Put it on. Won't kill you."

Jim picked up the whiskey bottle with his left hand. Swiftly he hurled it at Rufe's broad face, following it with the boot.

He was lunging forward, as Rufe's gun cleared leather. He heard the roar of the gun, and he felt hot fire across his side. But he struck Rufe with his full power, knocking him off the box to the floor. He fell upon him, driving his left knee into King's midriff, clutching at his right arm.

Rufe squealed. But he was powerful and he fought desperately. Jim discovered he could not hold King's arm down. Rufe would bring the gun up against him, fire, and that would be the end. The whiskey bottle had hit the hard case on the head, but it hadn't stunned him. The boot had only slightly disconcerted him. His arm was coming up, in spite of Jim's hold upon it.

Jim drove his knee deeper into the fat man's paunch. Rufe grunted. Jim raised his head, then swiftly lowered it, striking Rufe on the nose. He hit him again and again. But Rufe was still too strong for him. Jim was weakening; King was not.

Suddenly Jim released Rufe's arm. The fat man raised it, swung the gun around. Jim's gaze was fixed upon the weapon. Then he struck hard with his right fist. He landed a stunning blow on Rufe's forearm. The gun flew from his hand, slid across the floor.

"Now we're even," Jim grunted, and swung a right and left to Rufe's jaw.

The loss of the weapon cracked the fat man's nerve and he whimpered like a child. Jim's hands closed on King's thick neck. Driving his knee into King's belly, he raised his body, arched his back, and put all his remaining strength into choking him.

He was surprised by the speedy results. Rufe's face turned purple; he gasped faintly; tears came from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. Afraid of a trick, Jim did not release his grip until Rufe's body relaxed under him.

Then he sprang up, swung away from King, and snatched the gun. King lay still, gasping weakly.

Jim discovered that blood from the wound in his side was soaking through his shirt. He swayed weakly. But he had a few things to do before he could take care of himself.

Playing it safe, he tapped Rufe on the skull. Then he jerked off Rufe's belt, strapped his ankles together. He ripped a strip of canvas from the tarpaulin under the bedroll, turned the fat man over, and bound his hands.

"That'll hold the son of a gun!" muttered Jim.

SITTING down on the bedroll again, Jim tore away his shirt, and examined his wound. There was no water in the cabin so he wadded up several thicknesses of cloth from his shirt and applied it to the wound, binding it with a strip of canvas. Then, leaning back against the wall, the gun close to his hand, he closed his eyes.

"Come on, Happy," he mur-

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mured. "I hope you get here before them other two."

He must have dozed, for he came awake suddenly and blinked his eyes. Rufe was staring at him. Jim heard horses, outside. He reached for Rufe's gun and faced the door, holding the gun steady.

If Jig and Blacky were coming back already— Suddenly Jim laughed. He had heard Happy's good-natured voice.

"I'm bettin' on Jim, sheriff," Happy was saying. "Even if he did run into this Rufe King hombre, I'm bettin' on him."

Then Sheriff Lawson's deeper tones reached Jim.

"Go easy, Happy. Don't take any chances. If King is here—"

"He's here, all right," Jim called out. "All trussed up an' ready to hang. Walk in, amigos."

Happy laughed. "See?" he said. "I had Jim sized up right."

A moment later Happy appeared at the door. He walked in and the sheriff followed.

"That hunk o' fat over there is King, sheriff," Jim explained. "He has two pards around here—the two hands Prentice hired. They're goin' to bust open Prentice's safe an' rob him. The idea was to tie me into that job, plant some money on me, leave me here dead. If you get over to Prentice's, right away, maybe you can stop 'em in time. Me an' Happy could wait for 'em here, in case they pull it off an' come back."

"Don't fret yourself," Lawson said reassuringly. "That's been taken care of. I warned Prentice about them two. I had word about 'em. Heard they had trailed with Rufe King. Prentice'll handle 'em, all right. On my advice, he took his money out of his safe an' rigged a gun trap. They try a robb'ry, they're goin' to get lead, not gold. Here, Happy, give me a hand! Jim's gone an' passed out on us."

They lifted the lean cowboy and stretched him out on the bedroll. The sherff examined his wound and sent Happy out for the iodine and bandages he always carried in his saddlebags.

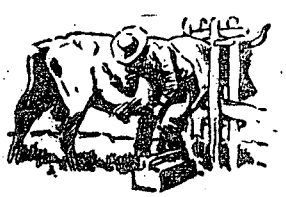
"I'm bettin' on him," Happy said, kneeling beside the sheriff as the latter worked over Jim. "He's had a hard tussle, but he's one hombre that's full o' sand."

"Yeah," agreed Lawson. "He's all right. He makes a hand, Jed says. I'll be right glad to have him on the pay roll, now that he's come to the end of vengeance road. Once I work King over, an' his two pards, I'll get the truth out of 'em. That'll clear Jim, I reckon, of all charges there might be against him. I'm mighty glad it turned out this way. Rufe King might've killed him."

Faintly, Jim heard that. He smiled. Yes, Rufe King might have killed him. There had been a moment when he had expected that, had seen no other outcome. Almost inaudibly, he murmured his brothers' names.

"Easy, Jim," the sheriff said soothingly. "They'll rest easy, too, now you've done what you had to do."

THE END



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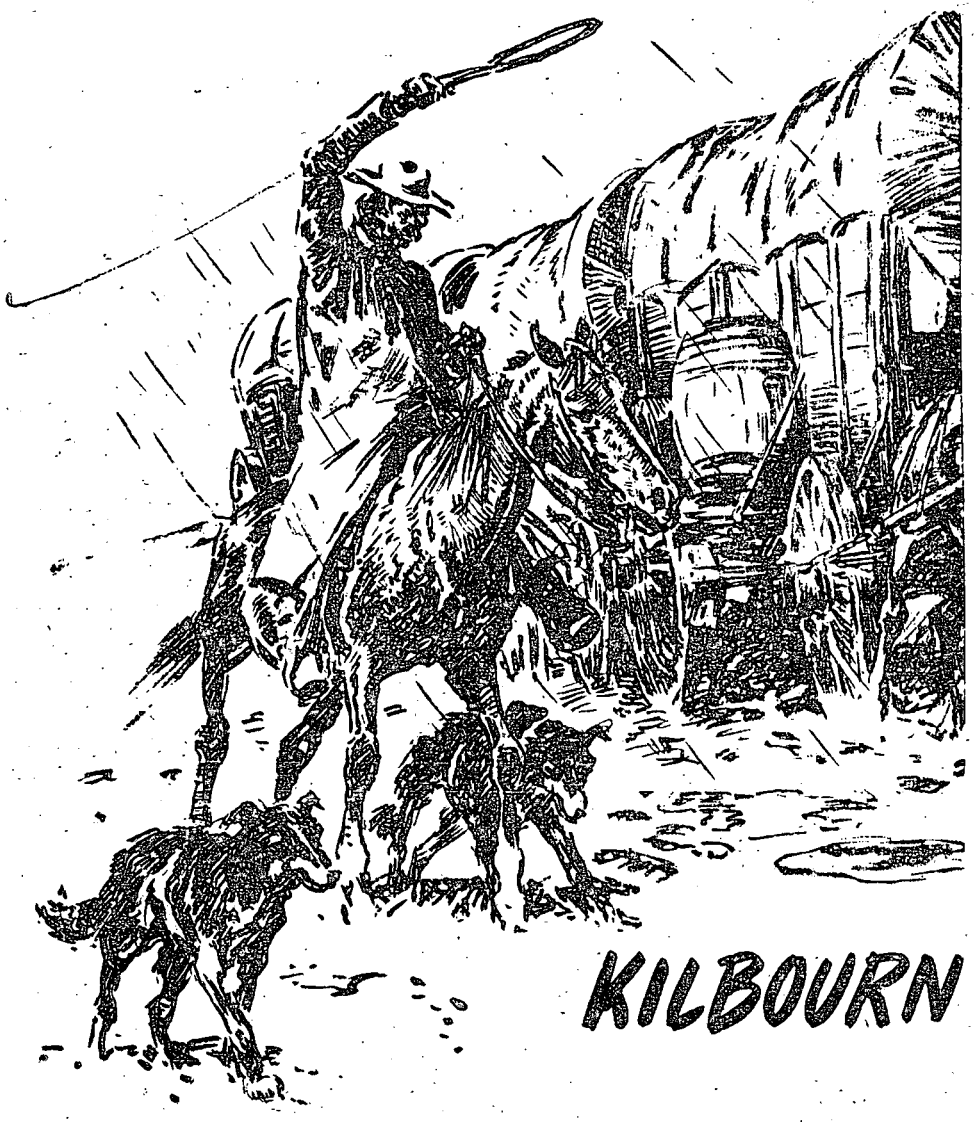

KILBOURN

by Walt Coburn

CHAPTER I

TINHORN HOLDUP

THE high-stake poker game that had been running thirty-six hours at the Owl had finally ended. The heavy losers like Bill Elias and Mike McConnico and Anse Jepson had left town, bleary-eyed for sleep, working on whiskey to keep awake. Elias had headed back to his cattle ranch on Box Elder Creek. McConnico had pulled out in his buckboard with a driver, for his Bear Gulch Mine. Anse Jepson had gone back to his sheep outfit in Little Basin. If they were sadder, they said nothing about it. Wiser, they might be

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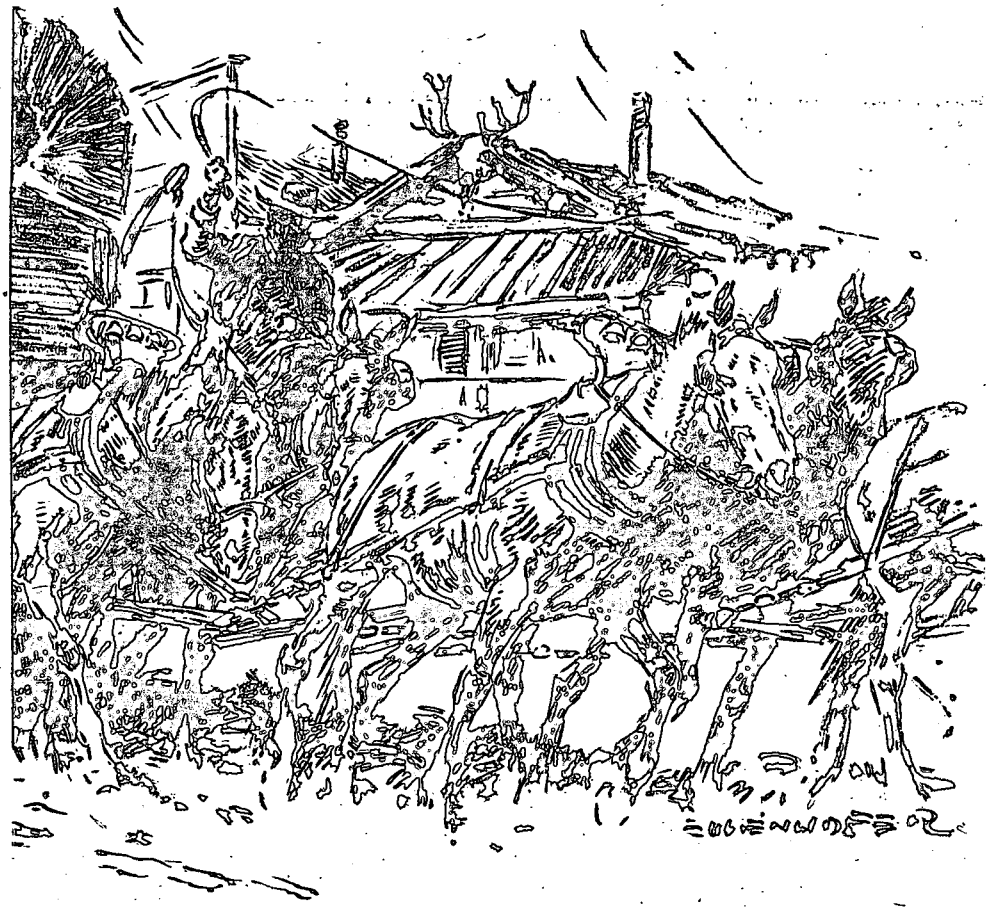

Jerkline Jones' leather-lunged bellowing to his sixteen-horse team drowned out the clamor from the saloon that had just been held up.

BROS.— Wolf Wranglers

planning a revenge poker game in their minds. But they had left the smoke-laden, stale-booze stench of the Owl for the cleaner, fresher air of the Montana prairie, and put the little railroad cowtown of Cottonwood behind them.

It was past midnight and there were probably a dozen idlers at the bar and small-stake tables. Cato Munday, owner of the Owl and high-stake gambler, was counting his heavy winnings into the big safe in his private office when the door behind him opened and closed. Quietly. A man wearing a black silk neck handkerchief over his face, his clothes hidden by a long yellow sad-

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dle slicker buttoned to his throat, stood there, his six-shooter in his hand.

Cato Munday was fast with a gun. But that long poker session had left him exhausted for sleep. His brain was tired and his other faculties were slowed down. As he went for his gun the masked man in the slicker took a swift step or two. The barrel of his six-shooter thudded down against the gambler's head and Cato Munday went limp.

The masked man pulled a long canvas sack from under his slicker. He emptied the contents of the big safe into the sack. Money, valuables left in hock to the gambler, papers that bore the I O U signatures of numerous men who had lost to Cato Munday from time to time, even the ledger that carried the gambler's accounts, went into the canvas sack. Lastly, the gambler's belly gun.

Munday was not quite knocked out. He lay there, his eyes slitted, motionless, playing possum. He waited until the man had gone out, closing the door softly behind him. Then he got groggily to his feet, cursing when he found his gun had been taken. He stumbled to the door and yanked it open and yelled in a croaking voice to his bartender and a bouncer and a couple of dealers and cappers.

"Get that man in the slicker that just went out of here! I've been robbed!"

Cato Munday never touched liquor, but he was reeling like a drunken man and a trickle of blood oozed from a scalp wound under his sleek black hair and down across his handsomely chiseled face that was the color of old ivory. His pale-yellow eyes were a little glazed. He collapsed before he reached the bar where he kept another gun.

IT was dark outside and the black drizzle was filled with noise. Jerkline Jones, freighter, was getting a late start out of town with his sixteen-horse jerk-line outfit that hauled four tarp-covered high-boarded freight wagons and the canvas-topped caboose.

Jerkline Jones and his swamper, Two Dog Moore, spent a lot of their spare dollars on red, white and blue ivory rings, and small bells that were strung on bands between the tops of the hames. Now their blacksnake whips were cracking like pistols. A hundred small bells the size of a cup were jangling and chiming gayly. The chain harness was clanking and the lead bars and stretchers and spreaders were adding to the din as the sixteen horses tightened the tugs and wagon wheels rolled. And through this din roared the leather-lunged voice of the freighter.

Jerkline Jones was six and a half feet tall, rawboned, with a mass of dirty yellow beard and hair that came to his shoulders. He rode his nigh wheeler and handled the jerk line while little Two Dog Moore rode along the line of eight teams, cracking his blacksnake whip.

"Tighten up!" roared Jerkline, and called off the names of his horses from the lead team down the string and swing teams to his wheelers. "Tighten up, there! You, Hell an' Damnation! Beer and Whiskey! Nip an' Tuck! Take It an' Leave It! Hay Foot an' Straw Foot! Roulette an' Faro! Ace an' Deuce! Broke an' Hungry! Tighten them tugs! Tighten up! Haw!"

As men with guns in their hands came out of the saloon, three or four of them running to the long hitch rack where saddled horses stood, the sixteen-horse team with its clanking, lumbering wagons swung across the wide main street, block-

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ing it so that the men who had mounted their horses had to ride in around and behind the buildings and thus lose valuable time in the pursuit. Meanwhile somewhere in the black drizzle of the night sounded the pounding of shod hoofs as a horse went yonderly at a run. The roar of guns added now to the din.

The men cursed Jerkline and he cursed them back with bellowing profanity and without once repeating himself. Jerkline and Two Dog, both tanked up on Cottonwood's forty-rod whiskey, had worked until long past dark loading their freight wagons. They were hauling powder to the Bear Gulch Mine at Twin Buttes, grub for the general store there, whiskey and beer for several saloons. And while they finished loading, the sixteen-horse string team had stood with chain tugs slack, munching oats from the big nose bags hung on their heads.

MAKING a midnight start in the drizzle was what Jerkline called startin' out in the cool of the evenin'. And always when he pulled out of town, he made that difficult turn in the street to let Cottonwood know that the greatest jerk-line artist in Montana was turnin' 'em on a dime an' givin' back a nickel change.

The freight outfit got under way, bells jingling, blacksnakes popping, Jerkline Jones cussing in his bellowing voice.

In the two-wheeled canvas-topped caboose that was big enough to hold two bunks, a small sheet-iron stove and a few cupboards and shelves, a small-sized man sat on the edge of a bunk nursing a partly empty bottle. He sat there in the darkness of the caboose with his bottle, singing softly to himself, oblivious to all outside clamor.

The door of the caboose opened and a man stepped inside, shutting the door after him. There was the swishing sound of a wet slicker and muffled sounds. The man was breathing hard, as though he had been running. Then the quick sounds of labored breathing hushed. A man's voice, low-pitched and dangerous, sounded inside the closed caboose.

"Light a match! Pronto!"

The little man on the bunk struck a match. He carried the flame cupped in his hands, to the bowl of a richly colored meerschaum pipe with a curved clouded amber stem. The light flare showed the little man's face with its two days' stubble of graying mouse-colored whiskers, his grayish face, his mild blue, bloodshot eyes. He gave no sign of fear or alarm when he saw the six-shooter in the intruder's hand. The man in the slicker had a black-silk handkerchief pulled up across the lower part of his face. The pair of eyes above it were steel-gray, cold, dangerous.

"Who the devil are you?" asked the man in the yellow saddle slicker. "How did you git in here? And why? Talk fast."

"There's no cause for belligerency," the little man's soft voice matched the mildness of his faded blue eyes. "I'm just a paying passenger to Twin Buttes. The amiable Two Dog suggested that I . . . ah . . . lay low until we were a few miles out of town. Then his partner, Jerkline, would not be so stony-hearted as to unload me and my *Tribune* in the desolate prairie wasteland. He assured me that Jerkline was a diamond in the rough and that beneath his unbathed, unshorn exterior lay hidden a heart of purest gold. Permit me to make myself known. I am Waldo Leandro Smith,

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journeyman printer and publisher of that oracle, that printed voice crying the truth in the wilderness, the Twin Buttes *Tribune*."

"Never heard of it."

"But you shall. If you'll be patient until we pass beyond the limits of the thriving little hamlet of Cottonwood, I'll light a lantern and you'll read the first issue. Printed within the lowly confines of Cottonwood's feed and livery barn, its contents are for the most part devoted to the biography of one Two Dog Moore. The genial Two Dog, never having seen his name in print, succumbed to the temptation of what is vulgarly known as a bribe. In return for this printing of his exclusive life's story, he agreed to load my printing press on one of the wagons and carry me as a stowaway in the caboose. Will you join me in a small libation, sir?"

"You talk like one of Anse Jepson's locoed sheepherders. Don't strike another light. And shut up."

THE freight outfit was pulling out of town, to the rumble of the laden wagons and the rattle of chain harness and the jingle of bells. Blacksnakes were cracking. the two-wheeled caboose was pitching and rolling and jolting lazily along the rutted road. The man in the slicker cussed tonelessly.

Men on horseback were out there now, firing questions at Jerkline.

"He robbed Cato Munday! Cleaned the Owl. Hang it, Jerkline, you or Two Dog must've sighted him. Whichaway did he go?"

"Whichaway would you go," roared Jerkline, "if you'd pulled off a holdup? Canada a night's ride to the north. The Bear Paws and Little Rockies to the south, and the badlands yonder side along the Missouri River. Don't go shootin' around these wagons. I'm haulin' powder. Tighten up! You, Hell an' Damnation! Beer an' Whiskey! Nip an' Tuck!"

The men on horseback rode on into the night. The freight outfit rolled along the mud-slippery road. The door of the moving caboose opened. Jerkline's whisper was as loud as another man's shout.

"You in there, Lant? You make it all right?"

"I'm in here. So is a locoed little half-pint codger that says he prints a newspaper and he's got a name called Waldo Leandro Smith."

Jerkline groaned as though he had been suddenly kicked in the belly. Then he ran through his vocabulary of cuss words and was out of breath when he finished.

"He's bin a-pesterin' me two-three days, while we was loadin', to take him an' his damned printin' press to Twin Buttes. Mebbeso we'll have to just knock 'im in the head, Lant. I swear I don't know how the hell he got here."

"He got out his first issue of his Twin Buttes *Tribune*," explained Lant dryly. "It carries the life story of Two Dog Moore. The second edition will run the exclusive story of the Owl holdup. Listen, you little dried-up an' blowed-away thing, kin you give us one good reason for lettin' you live?"

"I am the sole support of a motherless little girl." Waldo Leandro Smith hiccuped and took a drink. "I carry her picture next to my heart —in a wallet as empty as a discarded hat. Silence, gentlemen, is golden. I quote an old proverb. And on the other hand let me remind you of the might of the fearless press. Gentlemen, you are more than fortunate tonight. Behold your slightly in-

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ebriated but lion-hearted crusader. The Twin Buttes *Tribune* shall become the flaming sword of that crusader in the wilderness, these threadbare and tattered garments the shining armor. Such black-hearted knaves as Cato Munday, Bill Elias, Mike McConnico, and Anse Jepson shall feel the bite and sting and whetted edge of that untarnished, stainless blade of fearless might of the press." Waldo Leandro Smith hiccuped and became silent.

He sighed heavily and lay back on the bunk. There was the sound of gentle snoring.

Lant Kilbourn struck a match. Waldo Leandro Smith was not shamming. Lant blew out the match. He had let the black-silk neck handkerchief slip down loosely around his throat. He was sweating a little and there was a faint, mirthless grin on his weather-tanned, square-jawed face.

"It's up to you, Jerkline. You and Two Dog. It's my guess that this little ink-stained cuss ain't so dumb. Before he went out like Nellie's blind eye he dropped a strong hint. How long has he bin around Cottonwood? What does he know about Cato Munday or Elias or McConnico or Jepson?"

"He was bummin' drinks like any other bar fly, Lant, when we come to town last week. Spoutin' poems fer drinks. He's a harmless, likable sort o' cuss. He has that printin' outfit at the feed barn—"

"It's on one of your wagons now," said Lant flatly, "and if he runs off at the head in that newspaper me'n' you will be makin' horsehair bridles at the Deer Lodge penitentiary. Sober 'im up and sound him out. He's bad news and no mistake. Better cache that sack of stuff in one of the wagons. I got to git back to the roundup."

CHAPTER II

SPUR GIVE-AWAY

LANT KILBOURN, ramrod of the Pool outfit, pulled his saddle and blanket and bridle from under a bunk. While the freight outfit kept moving under the guidance of Two Dog Moore, Lant untied his saddle horse that was tied to the off wheeler. Saddling the horse, he rode into the black drizzle. Less than an hour later he was riding around the beef herd that was lying fairly well on the bed ground in spite of the thin drizzle.

"You're a sight fer weak eyes, Lant," said a slicker-clad cowhand on night guard. "We bin worried. Sheriff Puck Powers and a deputy come past. I said you was on your way to Cottonwood to see about gittin' cars to ship our Pool cattle, that you'd left about five minutes before he showed up. He said the Owl had been held up. That Cato Munday either didn't know who bent a gun barrel across his head, or wasn't sayin', if he did know."

Lant had changed slickers in the caboose. He now wore a black saddle slicker that came no lower than his knees, and a pair of bullhide chaps. He had even changed hats. And the black-silk neck handkerchief was replaced by a soiled white one.

"I'll drift on to town," he said, grinning in the darkness, "and see about the cars. And pick up the news."

"It's bad business, Lant. Dangerous. I don't like it. But it come off without a hitch?"

"Like shootin' fish. I turned some feller's horse loose an' quirted him off into the night. And Cato Munday don't know who hit 'em. I gutted his damned safe. Elias and McConnico and Jepson donated our Pool runnin' expenses for the season.

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Keep your head up, mister. The Pool is out o' debt."

Lant Kilbourn was whistling softly as he headed back for town. But he kept remembering that little mild-eyed drunken Waldo Leandro Smith, and his whistling was tuneless and came from behind set teeth.

It was nearly daybreak when he sighted the lights of Cottonwood. The only lights left burning in town came from the Owl.

THERE was a train that passed through about four in the morning and the man who was station agent, telegraph operator, train dispatcher and freight agent was in the habit of fetching over the bundle of newspapers and the mail sacks that were thrown off at the depot. He would drop the mail at the post office and fetch a few extra copies of the Great Falls, Butte and Helena newspapers to Cato Munday, the bartender and the Chinaman who had the restaurant next to the Owl. And thus he got his drinks, his early morning coffee and breakfast free. His name was Simms and he was Cottonwood's he-gossip. Simms was having his morning's morning at the bar and Cato Munday sat at a poker table with a pot of black coffee and the newspapers. Save for the bartender they were the only men in the place, not counting the bleary-eyed swamper who was mopping out and cleaning the big brass cuspidors.

Lant Kilbourn swung from his horse at the long hitch rack and went in through the swinging half doors, water dripping from his hat, short black slicker and bullhide chaps, his spurs jingling.

Simms and the bartender nodded. Cato Munday looked at Lant, his hard pale-yellow eyes taking in every detail of the tall, lean, wide-shouldered cowpuncher's appearance, from head to foot, from hat to boots. He was missing nothing. For a long moment he stared at Lant's boots and his silver-mounted spurs with their silver conchos on the spur straps, conchos that wore the Kilbourn K brand. Then the gambler's eyes lifted and there was a faint ghost of a smile on the thin-lipped mouth beneath a carefully trimmed black mustache.

Lant Kilbourn tensed under the level stare of those bloodshot pale-yellow eyes. There was an empty, cold feeling inside his belly. He had worn those spurs when he pulled off his lone-handed holdup.

The gambler went back to his newspapers. There was no love lost between Cato Munday and Lant Kilbourn. Lant thought that Simms and the bartender were looking at him oddly. There was something like uneasiness, an inner, pent-up excitement on the nondescript face of the station agent.

"We'll be needin' cars day after tomorrow, Simms," Lant said. "Forty cars. We'll commence load-in' right after daybreak. Have a drink."

The bartender and Simms had a copy of the Helena *Record* spread out on the bar. Simms fidgeted, took off his steel-rimmed spectacles and wiped them with a blue bandanna. The he-gossip of Cottonwood was fretting to break some sort of news. He cleared his throat.

"Your young brother, Chet," he said, pointing to an article in the paper, "has escaped from the Deer Lodge prison."

The healthy color drained from Lant Kilbourn's tanned, rain-wet face. The bartender shoved the late copy of the Helena *Record* around and tapped the article on the front page.

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It was not much of a write-up, nor was it informative. It stated that Chet Kilbourn, young cowman and widely known at the rodeos for his skill at roping and bronc riding, had escaped from the penitentiary at Deer Lodge where he was serving a term for cattle rustling. Chet Kilbourn, along with other cowpunchers, had been working at the prison ranch. A trusty, he had been breaking broncs there and had been allowed a certain amount of freedom. He had ridden away from the prison ranch and was reported missing at the evening check-up of prisoners. He had been gone several days. The warden still refused to believe that Chet Kilbourn would not return.

"Chet Kilbourn," the warden was quoted as saying, "will come back of his own accord."

LANT poured himself a stiff drink and gulped it down. He needed it. What had gotten into Chet to make him pull off a fool stunt like that when Lant and the other Pool ranchers were working hard to get Chet pardoned? Lant had risked his own life and freedom only a few hours ago in a desperate attempt to get evidence to hand over to the lawyer. He hadn't time yet to look through that stuff in the canvas sack that he had taken from Cato Munday's big safe, but he was hoping, gambling desperately, that he'd find what he wanted in the gambler's private papers. Evidence that would clear Chet's name and get a pardon for that wild, reckless young cowpuncher. Now Chet had violated the trust of the warden at Deer Lodge, as fine a gent as ever gave a cowboy prisoner a chance to make good. And Chet had broken prison.

Lant felt Cato Munday's yellow eyes watching him. He turned around slowly, fighting to keep his self-control. This was no time to go off half-cocked.

The gambler was sipping his strong black coffee and looking again at Lant's spurs. There was a brown stain on his sleek black hair where the doctor had taken a few stitches in his ripped scalp and painted it with iodine.

"I was just remembering," said the gambler's flat-toned voice, "you and Chet had your spurs made alike with your brand on the silver conchos. I'm wondering if Chet was in town last night."

Lant's jaw muscles knotted. There was nothing for him to say. Nothing at all. Nothing he could do. He forced a grin.

"Like as not, Chet went to see a girl somewhere. There's some good-lookin' girls in the Deer Lodge Valley. Or if there was a rodeo near there, he'd take it in, then come ridin' back to the prison ranch an' laugh it off. No, Chet wasn't nowheres near Cottonwood last night or he'd have let the wide world know it. Chet travels thataway. High, wide and handsome."

Cato Munday smiled thinly. "Somebody paid me a little visit around midnight. Gutted my safe. He made only one mistake. He should have killed me. Considering the deal from all angles, it might be a wise idea for that safe-robbing gent to return everything he took away with him. The jingle of your spurs recalls something to mind that I might pass on to Sheriff Powers for what it's worth to the law. I'll wait twenty-four hours. Then there'll be a bounty on Chet's hide."

The gambler went back to his newspapers, turning to the sporting page.

Lant Kilbourn paid for his drink. He told Simms to have the train of empty cattle cars at the stock-

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yards siding at daybreak the day after tomorrow. Then he walked out of the saloon, his spur jingling sounding loud and taunting in his ears. He got his horse and rode into the cold gray dawn, letting the drizzle sting his eyes. He felt sick inside.

He dared not go near Alkali Creek where Jerkline's freight outfit would be camped. Instead he headed back for the Pool roundup camp, his heart as heavy as the lead in his six-shooter. He wondered if he hadn't made a mistake in not crowding Munday into a gunplay and taking his chances on killing the gambler, providing he could beat that fast gun-slinger to the draw. Those damned spurs! Munday knew that Chet wasn't the man who had robbed his safe. Chet was slimmer, shorter. But Cato Munday was going to accuse Chet unless Lant fetched back that canvas sack with its stolen contents intact. Bill Elias had sent Chet to the pen. Elias would put up a big bounty on Chet's scalp. Munday would add to it. McConnico and Jepson would sweeten it.

CHAPTER III

RAMROD'S PAYOFF

BETWEEN town and the roundup camp, Lant Kilbourn met Sheriff Puck Powers and a couple of deputized possemen.

Puck was a thick-set man with reddish hair and a humorous grin that traveled into his eyes. But those eyes could turn cold and dangerous and Puck Powers was one law officer who could not be bought off, bluffed or scared away.

"I got word nearly a week ago, Lant, that Chet had strayed off," the sheriff said. "Somebody cleaned out the Owl last night. Cato Munday will try to hang it on Chet. So if you happen to cut the sign of that bronc-twistin' kid brother of yours, tell him to come in and give himself up before some bounty hunter cuts him down."

"I've bin tryin' to figger out, Puck, why he run away from the prison ranch. He must have had a mighty powerful reason."

"He made some wild talk when he got sent up, Lant. How he was comin' back to take care of Elias and Jepson for framin' him. And how he'd manhandle Cato Munday, then ride to Twin Buttes and drag it out o' big Mike McConnico. It was wild talk, Lant. But it'll all be remembered now. Sendin' Chet Kilbourn to the pen didn't knock his horns off none."

Sheriff Puck Powers rode on with his deputies. Lant wouldn't have been surprised to find Chet at the roundup wagon. But Chet had not been there. And the cowmen who made up the Pool, some of them grizzled and old enough to be Lant's father, eyed the big wagon boss with cold-eyed uneasiness.

"It looks like you shore played holy Ned last night, Lant," one of them put it into words as Lant changed to a fresh horse and joined them in the mess tent.

Lant's breakfast tasted like so much sawdust and the strong steaming-hot coffee could not melt the cold ache inside his belly.

"What's this about Chet bustin' out o' Deer Lodge?" asked another cowman when Lant made no comment on his last night's lone-handed play. "You an' Chet ain't tryin' to git the whole damned Pool outfit into trouble by some kind o' hair-brained fancy gun-slingin'? We don't want no range war. We done talked 'er over, Lant. Some of us got wives and families to think about. Got our li'l ol' ranches, such as they are. We kin hang an' rattle,

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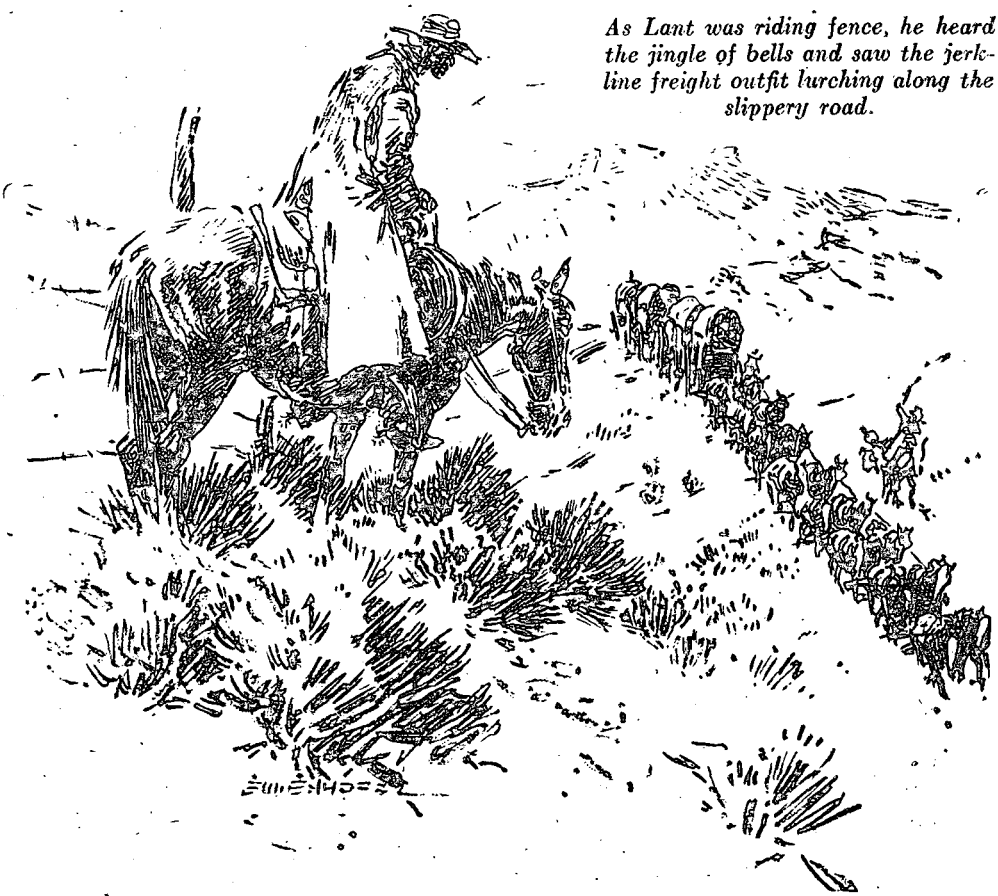
make 'er go somehow, without gittin' tangled in no gun-slingin' range war. We know your daddy got bushwhacked an' Chet got railroaded into the pen. And we know how you feel. But it looks like you're draggin' us into a shore harmful mess."

LANT KILBOURN had been squatting on his hunkers with his tin plate heaped with grub, his cup of black coffee half-emptied. He got to his feet now, walked outside and emptied his plate and cup, fetched them back and dumped them into the big dishpan with a loud clatter that smashed the uneasy silence.

"Why don't you come out with it?" he said, his voice bleak. "I'm not ramroddin' your Pool outfit. Ain't that it? And you don't need to put it into words. It's there in the coyote look in your eyes.

"Every damned man of you will be lickin' the boots of Elias or that sheep-stinkin' Jepson. Elias, that's crowded you to the wall, the cattle-rustlin' son of a snake. Yeah, and some of you got smart and sneaked off to Twin Buttes to borrow money from that big black mine-saltin' crook Mike McConnico. And some of you went to that tinhorn gambler, Cato Munday.

"Munday bought your mortgages from Elias and McConnico and Jepson. Or he pokered those same gents out of your mortgage papers.



As Lant was riding fence, he heard the jingle of bells and saw the jerk-line freight outfit lurching along the slippery road.

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And that gamblin' man has you all in his sack. And if you think you got the ghost of a chance to git an hour's extension on your notes or mortgages, then you're dumber than you're actin' now.

"Yonder's the Pool herd. A big un. Cars ordered. If them cattle is shipped, every dollar they fetch on the Chicago market will go to Cato Munday. And it won't be enough to save your nester outfits. Your wives and families that you talk about won't have a roof over their heads or grub to eat. When Cato Munday tightens the clamps he'll show you what's meant by that sayin': 'As cold as a gambler's heart.'

"A few nights ago you was all usin' your cryin' towels. And when I told you how I'd save your outfits you slapped me on the back and shook my hand and all but give three cheers.

"I taken the risks. I never asked a single man of you to share any part of the job. And I didn't know Chet had run away from Deer Lodge. Chet had no part of it. It was lone-handed and I got the job done. Now you're scared. To save your two-bit hides, some of you will squeal on me. I kin read it in your eyes.

"So, gentlemen of the Nester Pool, I'm cuttin' my string of ponies, cuttin' my K cattle. Your cars are ordered. Ship your cattle and pay through the nose to that tinhorn gambler. Because he'll have your mortgages and your due notes and your gamblin' I O U's back in his big cracker box safe. Squeal your guts out. You ain't worth fightin' for. I'm cuttin' my string from your Coyote Pool!"

Lant's voice was harsh. His eyes were hard and cold and gray. He walked out of the mess tent and into the rain, leaving a heavy silence behind him.

IT took a couple of hours for Lant to work his K steers out of the day herd. He drifted them off into a coulee where the feed was good, cut his string of horses and loaded his tarp-covered bed on a pack horse. He refused the lukewarm, half-scared offers of help from the younger Pool cowhands and did his work alone. Then he threw his string of saddle horses in with his bunch of steers and headed for the Kilbourn home ranch. The raw wind with its gray drizzle was at his back and he had covered considerable distance when he threw his cattle and horses into a fenced pasture at dusk. He caught a fresh horse and unloaded his bed at a little log cabin that was deserted. This was somebody's homestead that had been taken for debt and now belonged to Elias or Jepson or perhaps to Cato Munday. It was used as a pasture by freighters like Jerkline.

Lant was riding around the fence to make certain there were no broken gaps in it when he heard the jangle of bells and saw Jerkline's freight outfit coming down the slippery road off the benchland. Brakes set and rough locks on the wheels, the outfit came down the steep slant that was as slippery as grease. In the gathering dusk and drizzle the freight outfit took on an unreal, distorted, shadowy appearance in the drizzle, Jerkline's blacksnake popping, Two Dog Moore riding back and forth along the sixteen-horse-string team to keep the tugs tightened on that down grade where a pile-up meant disaster if the horses got tangled in the lead bars. It took skill and experience with a jerk line, perfect teamwork between the freighter and his swamper, horses

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that pulled together and gave the best that was in their stout hearts. Few freighters would come down that long steep grade in the dusk when the road was greasy and a slack tug or stretcher or lead bar meant a pile-up that would cripple the horses and overturn the heavily-loaded wagons. The lead team lunged into their collars, the other teams following, keeping those chain tugs tight, the lead bars up, so that double-trees and single-trees stayed level against the steady pull of the chain traces.

Blacksnakes were cracking. Jerkline's leathery-lunged voice was sounding above the squeal of brake shoes and rattle of chain harness and the jangle of a hundred little bronze bells.

"Tighten up! Hell an' Damnation! Beer an' Whiskey!"

He shouted their names on down to his stout wheel team, called Broke and Hungry. The high-boxed wagons had wagon sheets of heavy canvas roped down to protect the loads. The white-topped caboose was lurching and swaying. Two Dog Moore's two shepherd dogs trotted back and forth as the swamper rode his gentle horse along the string of sixteen horses.

On the nigh wheeler was Jerkline, who bragged that he never dropped trail, never left a wagon stuck in the gumbo mud. He'd shotgun a hill as he was shotgunning this steep grade now, his leaders trotting and the string and swing teams picking up the stiffer gait. Jerkline on his saddled nigh wheeler, handling his jerk line that guided his lead team and ran down through big ring keepers fastened to the hames of the other teams, the end of its long line gripped in the freighter's big hairy, scabbed hand. There were tons of grub and whiskey and beer in the wagons behind him and one wagon was loaded with cases of stick dynamite and metal kegs and cans of blasting powder. A full load of sudden death and destruction in that wagon at Jerkline's back. Enough powder and dynamite to blow this whole outfit, wagons, horses and men, into eternity in scattered bits. But Jerkline handled powder with the same tipsy carelessness that he handled sacks of flour and beans, with even less care than cased beer. For beer bottles, claimed Jerkline, bust.

LITTLE Two Dog Moore rode his gentle white horse with his two shepherd dogs ranging alongside. Two Dog, who herded sheep for Anse Jepson off and on when he and Jerkline had one of their quarrels. He was crippled in both legs so that he limped when the weather got like it was now. Little leathery-faced, kind-hearted Two Dog who had a terrible and deadly fear of powder. Riding chalky-faced now in the dark gray rain with a prayer moving his stiff lips and that horrible fear of powder gripping his heart. His blacksnake cracking. The blacksnake with its wide buckskin popper that never touched the hide of a horse save to knock off a horsefly.

Two Dog's prayers, stiff-lipped, silent. Jerkline's leather-lunged profanity.

And back in the swaying, tossing, lurching caboose was a little gray man with mild blue eyes and a painstakingly colored old meerschaum pipe and a partly emptied bottle. Lost in dreams, he hummed softly to himself as he kept his seat on the rear bunk. Little Waldo Leandro Smith, journeyman printer, newspaperman, drunkard, dreamer of splendid dreams.

The jerk-line outfit moved down the long, greasy, treacherous grade,

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leveling out at the foot of the hill to come at last to a sluggish stop in the rutted, muddy gumbo.

Horses were steaming in the dark gray dusk and drizzle. Brakes were kicked off. Rough-lock chains were knocked loose with a single jack sledge.

Two Dog wiped the cold sweat from his rain-washed face and sucked his breath in with a sob. Fear still glazed his sky-blue eyes.

Jerkline, shaking his matted mane and beard free of rain, swung to the ground. He opened the lid of the big jockey box where hub wrenches and axle grease were kept. Pulling the cork on a quart bottle with his big strong teeth, he handed the bottle to his little cripple-legged swamper. His voice lifted in a bellowing shout.

"All out, back there, Waldo! Crawl into that slicker and—them gum boots and make a freight hand! All out fer a drink of whiskey and no man eats supper till the last horse is grained. Fill them nose bags, Waldo Leandro! Two Dog, don't go trompin' in the mud till you git them gum boots on. You git rheumatiz in them joints. Had to hit a lope when that rough lock slipped on the powder wagon and that brake shoe burnt through block and steel. It was slipp'ry as greased hell. Lemme at that likker, Two Dog. Hollerin' dries a man's neck out inside."

Lant Kilbourn rode up out of the gray drizzle. Jerkline handed him the bottle and they both pretended not to see the terrible sick look on Two Dog Moore's face as his eyes stared at the broken rough-lock chain and the burned-out brake shoes on the powder wagon.

"I hope and trust," said the mild voice of Waldo Leandro Smith, "that no rain has seeped in on my printing press."

"You ain't knocked it in the head, Jerkline?" Lant asked.

"Nope. Waldo's all right. You orter read what he wrote about Two Dog. He's tacklin' a story about me next— Seen a feller that knowed you today, Lant. He's lookin' good. Full of hell as ever. He'll show up again." Jerkline meant Chet. Lant grinned, stiff-lipped, and nodded.

CHAPTER IV

PRINTER'S DYNAMITE

WHEN Lant Kilbourn said he wanted his canvas sack with its loot from Cato Munday's safe, Jerkline squirmed uneasily and his bloodshot green eyes shifted.

"Chet took it, Lant. Seems like he'd bin to the Pool wagon after you cut your string there. You know Chet. That boy'd cut off his right arm with a dull knife fer you. He must've went 'round and 'round with them Pool gents. And he said that nobody was goin' to hang anything on you. I don't know how he figgered me into it, but he told me to hand over that sack of stuff or he'd git tough. And I didn't want Chet gittin' tough. He took the sack of stuff an' rode off, whistlin' gay an' free. Chet says for you to hightail it back to the Pool wagon where you belonged. Chet and the perfessor here, Waldo, they had theirselves a time with some of the stuff in the sack."

The two bunks in the caboose were littered with a small hand printing press and scrapped paper. Waldo Leandro Smith handed Lant a copy of what he said was a trial issue of the Twin Buttes *Tribune*. The black ink still fresh on the paper.

"WHEN WOLVES GATHER!" read the large black headline. Under four

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separate headings was a brief outline concerning the misdeeds of four men: Munday, Elias, McConnico and Jepson. Munday was styled as a crooked gambler, Elias a land-grabbing cattle rustler, McConnico a crooked mine promoter who "salted" mines to sell to his victims. Jepson, the article said, could be sent to prison for fraudulent land deals. Those were the four wolves who gathered at the Owl to split their killings and gamble the proceeds in long poker sessions.

"There is more high explosive in that sheet, sir," Waldo Smith said mildly; "than there is loaded on Jerkline's powder wagon. Your brother, Chet, has taken copies of the trial edition to Cottonwood. And in that canvas sack he carries sufficient authentic proof to back every word and punctuation mark in the accusations outlined in the *Tribune*. Let those wolves sue Waldo Leandro Smith for libel if they dare. I'll need no attorney at law to plead my case. I hew to the mark, sir, and let the chips fall where they may— You'll join me in a small libation?"

The little ink-stained man put his meerschaum pipe in a large leather plush-lined case and snapped it shut. He pulled the cork on his bottle and offered it to Lant Kilbourn. Waldo Smith's smile was as gentle as that of a child. But there was a tone to his voice as clear and unblurred as the metal bells on Jerkline's string team. And in his mild blue eyes showed tiny bright sparks.

Lant took a drink. Chet and this little mild-mannered codger with printer's ink staining his silvery hair had taken the deal away from him.

"If I was you, Lant," said Jerkline, while they stood crowded into the caboose where Two Dog was starting supper, "I'd hightail it on back to the Pool outfit. This is goin' to turn into one of them nights when a herd won't lay on a bed ground. Them cattle is bound to drift. And without you there to ramrod the outfit, they'll let that herd scatter and spill all over the country. Them nesters won't pen enough steers at the yards to fill half a dozen cars. Them fellers got a leetle worried an' fretful an' scared. You bowed up an' pawed dirt in their faces, hooked right an' left an' horned your way out. They was already regretful when Chet showed up there. You can't quit them pore suckers in a tight, Lant. You kin make it back by second-guard time. You're still ramroddin' that Pool outfit, Lant."

TWO DOG MOORE piled a thick steak, fried spuds and navy beans on a plate and told Lant to get outside of it. There were hot biscuits and the coffee was fresh and strong. Lant wolfed his grub, washed it down with coffee and rolled a cigarette.

The two shepherd dogs lay stretched out, their wet coats steaming, on Two Dog's bunk. The caboose was crowded, the air thick with the mingled odors of cooking food, wet dogs, sweaty men, whiskey, tobacco smoke and printer's ink. Lant grinned and said he reckoned that he'd wore out his welcome here, that they might be able to use the space he'd leave in the caboose.

Jerkline was lighting an extra lantern. He was going out to tap a barrel of whiskey. He had a hammer, a dull-edged cold chisel, a small gimlet and a short length of small rubber hose about the size of a thick pencil. He would knock loose one of the barrel hoops, bore a hole with the gimlet, siphon off a bucket full of whiskey, then plug the hole with a wooden peg and put the barrel

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hoop back in place to cover the plugged hole. Freighter's shrinkage, the saloonmen called the loss of a gallon or two of the barreled whiskey.

Lant mounted a fresh horse, left his other horses and cattle in the pasture and told Jerkline to carry his bedroll along and to let Waldo Leandro Smith use it. And with a quart of whiskey and a copy of Waldo Smith's *Tribune* in his chaps pocket, Lant headed back for the Pool roundup. He felt better with grub in his belly. And his temper had cooled off hours ago. Those little ranchers who made up the Pool outfit were his friends. Some of them had families. They needed the money this shipment of cattle would fetch in. And while they were fair-to-middling cowhands, Lant doubted if they'd have sense enough to turn out to the last man and start drifting the cattle on to the stockyards. Handling a big herd on a black, rain-filled night was no easy job. Lant was glad he was going to help them.

As he figured, there had only been four men on first guard. He found the others at camp. Though it was an hour past second-guard time nobody on first guard had ridden into camp to call the relief.

"Pull on your slickers," Lant told them. "Fork your night horses. We'll be lucky if we kin locate the herd."

But they got a lucky break or else Lant's cowhand savvy guided them to the drifting herd that was a vast moving black blot in the rain-drenched night. He told them to bunch the herd, keep the edges thrown in close, and sing to 'em. He rode up on the point and when they came to a barbed-wire fence he knew it was the big Elias private pasture at the edge of town where the Elias roundup always held their beef herd the night before they shipped. Lant got half a dozen men to help him and they tore down the fence for a hundred yards and drifted the herd through the wide gap and kept on. Bill Elias would raise particular hell about that fence cutting and trespassing, but the Pool herd would be in the yards by then and the big native steers would be prodded up the chute into the cars.

Lant had located the nighthawk and told that owl-eyed guardian of the remuda to fetch his cavvy on with the cattle so that when a horse got leg-weary in that heavy muddy going, the rider could catch a fresh mount.

The rain got in under a man's slicker, soaked his clothes and filled his boots, chilling him to the bone. And a drink of raw whiskey was priceless. But Lant never pulled the cork on his bottle. It would taste all the better and cheer up those soaked, shivering cowhands about daybreak when they got the cattle penned. Lant Kilbourn was not the man to sneak even a small drink while his cowhand crew went without. And that one lone quart would allow no more than one good drink apiece when it was passed around.

The night was too black to bother with gates where the cattle would pile up along the fence. So Lant took a couple of men and loped on ahead to tear down the fence on the far side of the pasture. He grinned to himself as he pictured the wrath of Bill Elias.

IT was a long, cold, wet job but the time passed fast enough as Lant kept his herd moving. He had little time to worry about his brother. Chet Kilbourn was wild and reckless and a gambling fool,

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but in a tight he had a cool head and steady nerves and the boldness of his ways won for him more often than he lost. Chet must have a strong reason for riding away from the prison ranch. He had shown up here, figured out Lant's play, and now was making some kind of a bold, mighty dangerous play for big stakes. Chet played for keeps. And Chet had done a neat job of taking over the blame for that Owl holdup. There was no guessing his next move.

The rain slacked off and there was the first faint gray streak of dawn in the sky when Lant and his Pool outfit reached the stockyards a few miles from town. And it was daybreak by the time the cattle were in the pens and the locomotive with its long string of empty cattle cars was shunted in on the stockyards siding and the train crew had spotted the first car at the loading chute.

There were times when the train crew and the cowpunchers did not hit it off any too well. This, Lant figured, when he saw the conductor and brakeman and engine crew talking together, promised to be one of those ornery train crews. He yanked his hat down and rode over to have it out now with them.

"Are you Lant Kilbourn?" snapped the conductor.

"You called it, mister. What's on your mind?"

"Simms canceled this train a couple of hours ago. Then a tall young cowpuncher with black hair and whiskers and a six-shooter in his hand took over. He knocked Simms silly and told us to get this train to the yards or he'd gun-whip us. He said you'd be responsible. So if you want these cars, sign for 'em here and now."

Lant grinned and signed for the train. That damned bootlicking Simms—taking orders from Cato Munday. That Chet!

"That road-agent gun-slinger said to give you his regards and tell you he'd meet you in jail," the conductor went on. "He put a couple of jugs of whiskey in the caboose for you. Said you fellers might need a snort to take the chill out of your guts. Loaded his horse in one of the cars and rode the engine here, with his six-shooter in the engineer's back. When we got here he unloaded his horse and rode off while you was pennin' the first of your cattle. What is he? Some kind of an outlaw?"

"One of the best kind," answered Lant. Grinning, he headed down the tracks for the caboose.

Lant rode back with a couple of gallon jugs. He passed the first jug around and warned his crew not to get drunk. The first cattle were going up the slanting loading chute, urged up the cleated chute by prod poles, when Sheriff Puck Powers rode up.

"It's against the law, Lant, to load cattle without there's a stock inspector here to pass on every head," the lawman said sternly. "You know that."

LANT'S jaw muscles knotted and his eyes, bloodshot from loss of sleep and being whipped by the rain, were a cold gray.

"The stock inspector was notified in plenty time, Puck. I'm not forced to hold cattle here in the yards without feed till he gits around to showin' up on the job. These cattle kin be inspected along the line when we unload to feed between here and Chicago. Simms canceled this train. The same man that bullied Simms into that dirty trick is keepin' the stock inspector hid out. No damned tinhorn like Cato Munday kin push us around thataway, Puck."

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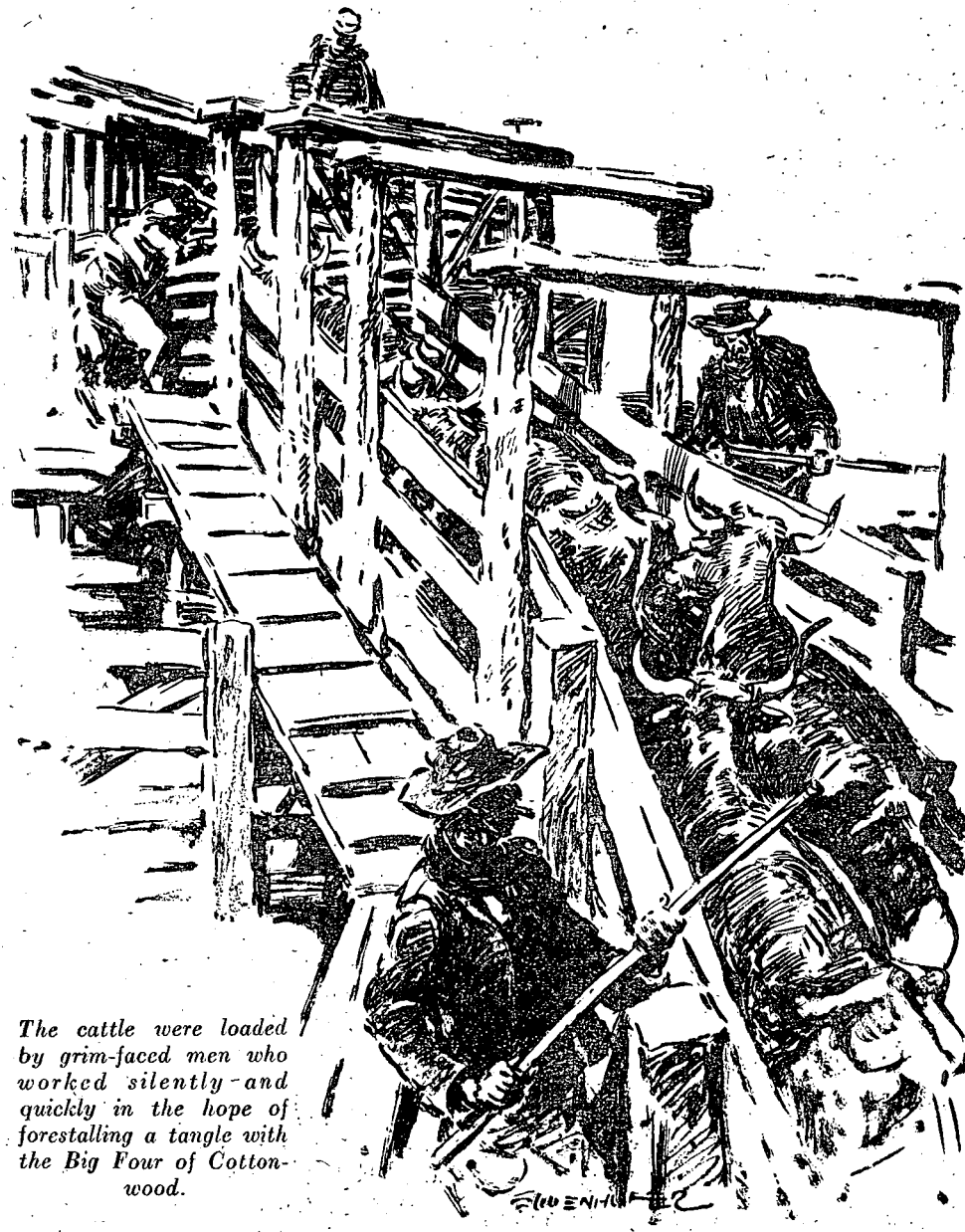

The cattle were loaded by grim-faced men who worked silently and quickly in the hope of forestalling a tangle with the Big Four of Cottonwood.

"Ain't you a little high-handed, Lant?"

"I'm loadin' these Pool cattle, regardless."

"Then I'll inspect 'em for brands," said Sheriff Puck Powers. "Don't let me forget, though, when we're done loadin', that I've got a bench warrant for your arrest to serve on you. Let's have a shot of that hard likker. Then me'n' you will tally these steers as they're loaded."

"What am I charged with, Puck?"

"Murder. Simms was shot where his galluses cross while he was sittin' at his telegraph key. Lucky there's

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a barber in town that has helped Simms out from time to time and kin handle the telegraph and tend to the trains. Or there could have bin a train wreck.

"Simms spread the news in town that you'd beat him up and shoved the crew of this cattle train around with a gun. You and Chet. Somebody got me out o' bed and said I'd better git uptown and on the job. I found Simms shot in the back, deader'n a doornail. Cato Munday swore out the warrants for you and Chet. I hope you boys kin prove that Munday is a liar when he says in court that he was an eyewitness to the killin'. Seen Chet?"

"I haven't seen Chet since he went to the pen, Puck," Lant answered quietly. "That's no lie. And I kin prove that I haven't left this roundup outfit. Never mind, Puck. I'll go with you when we git these cattle loaded. Want my gun?"

"Better git out your tally book." Sheriff Puck Powers ignored that last question. "Call them brands as they go in. I'll check with you. How many you shippin', Lant?"

"I cut mine back. They'll go with the second shipment."

They got out tally books and stubby pencils. There was a hard bright twinkle in the sheriff's eyes.

"Elias had better hire another fence crew. I hear that beef-pasture fence of his fell down in a couple places. What's the iron on that big brockle-faced ox, Lant?"

Cattle bawled. Cowpunchers yipped and worked with prod poles. Riders in the muddy yards kept moving through from the main corrals into the smaller pens. Mud and sweat and empty bellies. Lant Kilbourn and Sheriff Puck Powers marking down the tally under each Pool brand. Another car loaded and the bull bar slammed and fastened. The locomotive chugging. Cars jolting as the next empty was spotted at the loading chute.

Lant kept thinking of Simms, the harmless, weak-spined, talkative he-gossip of Cottonwood. Shot in the back. Simms didn't deserve an end like that. Chet might have given the station agent a fist whipping, but he hadn't shot Simms in the back. Puck Powers knew that as well as Lant did. But what had Simms done to provoke that cold-blooded murder? It went further and deeper than an argument over a train of cattle cars.

Cato Munday had given Lant twenty-four hours to return that sack of stuff. Those twenty-four hours would be up long before these cattle were loaded and on the way. Was that why Puck hadn't heard Lant's question about handing over his gun? Was there some trouble coming before they got the last of the Pool beef loaded? Mebbeso.

Another car was loaded. The train crew was spotting the next empty. Sheriff Puck Powers, reaching in his pocket for a fresh cigar, pulled out a folded copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's Twin Buttes *Tribune*.

"This was shoved under my office door, Lant. Seen it? There's just plain dynamite in this sheet. Who in thunder is this Waldo Leandro Smith, editor?"

"It's dynamite, all right," agreed Lant. "Waldo Leandro Smith, editor. Hell of a name, now, ain't it?"

With a grin, Lant handed the smudgy hand-printed paper back to the sheriff.

"It'll blow them fellers sky high if he kin prove what he's got printed. Which he says here that he can. There was a copy of this thing on Simms' desk. Blood spilled all over it."

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CHAPTER V

CATTLE LOADING

SHERIFF PUCK POWERS, working as brand inspector there at the top of the loading chute, kept covertly watching Lant Kilbourn. He had half a notion to tear up that bench warrant here and now. Puck was no man's political tool. Siding with Lant and Chet Kilbourn and these little ranchers who made up the Pool, was going to lose him the coming election. Elias, who owned the big Box E outfit on Box Elder Creek, swung a lot of votes among his cowpunchers and men who owed him money. He'd vote every last man of them to get Puck Powers out of office. Even as big Mike McConnico would vote his hard-rock miners at Twin Buttes. And lanky Anse Jepson would vote his sheepherders, camp tenders, farm hands and everybody he could round up in Little Basin, while Cato Munday controlled the votes of Cottonwood.

Election was only a couple of weeks distant. Buck those four big powers in this strip of Montana cow country and you were licked before you started. Those men had their own candidate for sheriff, in case Puck Powers got out of line. The genial, square-shooting sheriff had been warned by Elias, McConnico and Jepson. And no later than this morning when Simms had been found murdered at his telegraph desk, Cato Munday had given Puck a flat-toned warning that left no room for compromise.

"Get Lant and Chet Kilbourn and don't waste time. Or you'll be hunting a new job."

Bill Elias had railroaded Chet to the pen. The Kilbourn boys were not rustling cattle from anybody. But the Pool cowmen had about decided to take the matter up with the cattlemen's association and have either Chet or Lant Kilbourn appointed stock inspector. There had been a lot of cattle rustling and horse stealing. The Pool men said that the two Kilbourn boys were the men to get the job done.

Puck Powers had been undersheriff under Sheriff Jake Kilbourn, father of Lant and Chet. Sheriff Kilbourn, hot on the trail of some cattle rustlers, had been waylaid and killed in the badlands and Puck had stepped into the dead man's job of sheriff. He said he'd do his best to get the men who had bushwhacked Jake Kilbourn.

It had been Chet who openly precipitated more trouble when he went on a fighting spree. With his spurs let out to the town hole and his Stetson slanted at a fighting angle, Chet had accused Bill Elias, Anse Jepson, Mike McConnico and Cato Munday of being the men behind the murder of Sheriff Jake Kilbourn. Chet had tried to crowd them into a gunplay. But it would have been suicide for any man to go for his gun while wild Chet Kilbourn had a six-shooter in his hand.

So they had taken another more subtle and less dangerous way of removing Chet Kilbourn from circulation. He was framed on the cattle-rustling charge. Sent to prison. But on the witness stand Chet had had his say.

"Sheriff Jake Kilbourn had enough on you four buzzards to send you over the road," he had charged bitterly. "So you had him killed. But I'll come back from that Deer Lodge pen. And you'll have me and Lant to kill. And, listen, you four slimy snakes, that'll take a lot of doin'."

Now Chet was off somewhere distributing copies of Waldo Leandro Smith's newspaper. And somewhere Chet had the absolute proof to back

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all the ugly accusations in this little hand-printed sheet. Chet was crowding the issue. In his headlong reckless way that young cowhand was carrying a high-handed fight to the enemy. Lant, eight years older and more level-headed, had wanted to play it more carefully.

"Let 'em railroad you to the pen, Chet," he had urged his brother. "I'll git you out before you've had time to get used to the place. And I'll do some detective work, here in the badlands. You might contact some renegade at Deer Lodge who knows somethin'. Take it easy, Chet."

But telling Chet to take it easy was like trying to stop a stampede lone-handed with a red lantern.

PUCK POWERS knew about Chet commandeering the train Simms had canceled. He talked to the train crew while they spotted cars.

"Simms was alive when Chet loaded his horse in an empty cattle car and rode the engine here to the yards," Powers told Lant. "They said he headed off in the opposite direction from town. And you haven't bin near Cottonwood accordin' to the Pool men. Where do you reckon Chet went, Lant?"

"Peddlin' his papers." Lant grinned flatly. "Yonder comes the stock inspector. Elias and Jepson are with him."

"You got any of their cattle in this herd, Lant?"

"Not unless we picked 'em up last night in the dark. I had the herd trimmed and ready."

It was drizzling rain again. The stockyards were slimy and muddy and the cattle hard to work. Horses slithered and slipped in the mud. Tempers were none too good. The men had been up all night, working on whiskey. No hot grub for breakfast.

There had been no time to hold up the herd outside the yards and cut for strays. They could have picked up some Box E cattle last night when they came their ruthless way through Bill Elias' beef pasture. It wasn't a cheering thought.

Bill Elias was part California Mexican. A short, thick-set man with bowed legs and a paunch. His iron-gray hair and mustache were coarse and bristly. His speckled eyes were a mixture of gray and black, set under scowling black brows. He was a good cowman and his was the only outfit in that part of Montana that worked Mexicans. He had half a dozen with him now. They were said to be renegades and tough hands, outlaws from Mexico. Some of them mixed breeds.

Anse Jepson ran cattle and sheep. He was lanky, loose-framed, with big, heavy-knuckled hands. He had huge feet shoved far into his stirrups and sat his horse like a loose bag of bones. His nose was large and his muddy-colored hair was thin, lifeless. His eyes, red-rimmed and bloodshot, were pale green. His voice was nasal and harsh. He had a habit of keeping his sheepherders and camp tenders in debt to him and made them buy their clothes and tobacco and bedding at his ranch store, charging them three or four times the regular prices. He ran sheep, he said, to protect his range against Elias and the Pool ranchers. He was crafty and underhanded, ornery and dangerous when crossed.

Lou Lupton, the stock inspector, was a big man with a growing paunch and the red-veined face of a hard drinker. His voice was whiskey-husked, his small blue eyes hard, cruel and treacherous. Lou Lupton was the man Cato Munday and the

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others would run against Puck Powers for sheriff. Lupton was as crooked as Puck Powers was straight. He had killed a few men and traveled on his tough reputation as a gun fighter. There was blood in his eye now.

Lupton was the man who had arrested Chet Kilbourn for cattle rustling. The stock inspector had, Chet swore, planted the evidence himself that had framed Chet and sent him to the pen.

There was no love lost between Lant Kilbourn and Lou Lupton. Sheriff Puck Powers scowled.

"Keep your shirt on now, Lant," he warned in a low voice. "Don't go off half-cocked."

"I won't, Puck. But if that big glory hunter makes a move for that notched gun he packs, I'll gut-shoot him, sure as hell. It's bin my guess from the start that it was Lou Lupton that shot my daddy in the back. I'm goin' to have to kill that big jasper sooner or later, or git killed a-tryin'."

"The sign ain't right, Lant. Take 'er easy. Let me deal 'em."

ELIAS was scowling blackly. Jepson's grin had an ugly, cunning leer to it. Stock Inspector Lou Lupton glared hard at Lant and the sheriff.

"It's agin' the law to load cattle without inspection," wheezed Lupton. "Damn well you know it. Anyhow, you're supposed to be under arrest, Kilbourn."

"I'm inspectin' these cattle, Lou," Powers said quietly. "And here's what I think of that bench warrant Cato Munday had sworn out for Lant Kilbourn."

Taking the bench warrant from his pocket, the sheriff ripped it to shreds.

"I've got cattle in this herd," said Elias. "Lant Kilbourn and these nesters tore my beef pasture fence down last night. I had some steers in that pasture, feedin' 'em for my butcher shop at Cottonwood."

"If you got any Box E cattle in this pool herd," said Lant, "they'll be cut back."

Lou Lupton cursed in his whiskey voice. "Unload what cars you've got loaded, mister. I'll look 'em over. Jepson claims you've got some of his cattle in your hen-yard Pool herd. These cattle don't git loaded without my inspection. You've got no right to horn in on this, Puck."

Powers grinned mirthlessly. "Take Elias and Jepson," he said bluntly, "and them Box E cowhands, and git back to town. Claw for that fancy-notched gun you pack, Lou, and I'll kill you. Keep those men out o' the yards or they'll git hurt. I'm the only law that counts here and now. If you don't believe me, fill your hand!"

Lant and the Pool men had their hands near their guns. Lant's voice cut like a knife.

"Lou Lupton is my meat, Puck. I'll gut-shoot him, then prove later that he murdered my father."

Anything could happen now. Lou Lupton had killed several men and had cut notches on the handle of his gun to tally his killings. But he had not given one of his victims a real fighting break. And he wasn't taking any chances with Puck Powers or Lant Kilbourn.

Puck reached into his pocket and pulled out the folded copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's Twin Buttes *Tribune*. His eyes twinkled as he shoved it at the stock inspector.

"Read that, Lou, if you haven't seen the latest. By the look on their faces I'd gamble that Elias and Jepson got their early copies. This

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Waldo Leandro Smith calls his shots."

"Proof to back all he says," added Lant, "came out of Cato Munday's safe. Walk slow, gents, and speak easy."

Lant lifted his voice to a shout. "Keep them cattle a-comin', cow servants. We're losin' time. If them Box E things bother you, take to 'em."

Elias, Jepson, Stock Inspector Lou Lupton and the Box E cowpunchers sat their horses outside the yards. They talking among themselves in low tones, Lant and Puck Powers covertly watching them.

Lant called out to his Pool cowpunchers to work the herd for Box E or Jepson J cattle and cut back any they found. The work of loading went on in the mud and drizzle. Bawling cattle and shouting cowhands working on whiskey. The men of the train crew were interested onlookers.

The mess wagon and bed wagon pulled in on the river about noon.

Elias, Jepson, Lou Lupton and the Box E men finally pulled out with about forty or fifty head of cattle the Pool herd had picked up last night in the Elias beef pasture.

A few men would ride over to the camp and wolf hot grub and steaming black coffee spiked with whiskey. Changing to fresh horses, they'd lope back. Working in the mud and drizzle slowed them down, but before dark they had the last cattle car loaded, the bull bar slammed into place, the train ready to pull out. The cowpunchers who were going to Chicago with the cattle shipment threw their bedrolls and war sacks into the caboose. The locomotive bell clanged, the whistle howled mournfully in the gray dusk, the Pool herd was on its way to the Chicago stockyards.

"Go saddle your town horses, cowhands," ordered Lant. "We're paintin' Cottonwood red tonight!"

CHAPTER VI

LYNCH PARTY

As one Pool cowpuncher put it, there wasn't much to daub, there at Cottonwood, even if a man had plenty of red paint. They had no money to spend for gambling or booze or at the honkatonk. Almost to a man, they were in debt to Cato Munday, even though the gambler no longer had their mortgages and notes and I O U's locked up in his big safe. Their credit was good for drinks at a couple of the smaller places where Lant took them. They had shed their wet clothes that were grimed by stockyards muck, washed up and shaved and put on their town duds.

"Give these gents what they want," Lant told the saloonmen at the Last Chance, the Maverick and the Silver Dollar. "Mark it on your books. They're good for it."

But none of them went into the Owl, or the Cato-Munday-owned honkatonk. They had not come to town to gamble or dance. They wore their guns and they were looking around for any Box E or Jepson J cowhands who might be in town and on the prod.

The older cowmen of the Pool had stayed at camp. Sheriff Puck Powell had stayed with them there. Lant knew how to keep his men in line. And when cowboys are in town, a wise sheriff has business elsewhere.

But there seemed to be no Box E or Jepson J cowpunchers in town. There was no sign of Elias or Jepson. Stock Inspector Lou Lupton was nowhere around. Nor was Cato Munday at the Owl. The town was quiet. Too quiet to suit Lant.

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There was something wrong.

Lant figured he had found the answer when he saw the freshly painted reward dodger, a huge placard three feet square, tacked on the wall above the back bar at the Owl. It offered two thousand dollars, dead or alive, for Chet Kilbourn.

The man at the feed barn verified Lant's fears. The Box E and Jepson J outfits had turned into manhunting posses. Stock Inspector Lou Lupton headed the big posse of men who had ridden out of town just before the Pool outfit had ridden in. Elias and Jepson had ridden away together. Cato Munday had departed in his fancy-top buggy, driving his team of trotters. Elias, Jepson and Munday had left for Twin Buttes, fifty miles away, Lou Lupton's posse riding armed escort.

"Cato Munday," said the barn man, "was askin' questions about that little drunk that had a printin' press set up here at the barn. The little cuss that Two Dog Moore and Jerkline took along with their freight outfit."

That was all Lant needed to know. "It looks bad," he told the younger Pool men. "Don't come along with me unless you're ready to mix into trouble."

Only one of the Pool men dropped out and he headed back for camp to take the news to Sheriff Puck Powers and the older Pool cowmen that Lant Kilbourn was really on the warpath.

The storm had cleared away finally, the gray sky breaking. The stars and a round, cold white moon showed as the clouds scudded across the sky.

Lant and his men rode at a long, steady trot, following the wagon road from Cottonwood to Twin Buttes. And the mud showed the fresh tracks made by the posse. Cato Munday's buggy tracks were there with the tracks of shod saddle horses. Now and then an empty whiskey flask told that the posse were tanking up as they rode.

LANT was grim-lipped now. He had gotten Jerkline into this mess, though it had actually been the freighter's idea that Lant use him and his freight outfit for a getaway after he held up the Owl. Cato Munday was about to confiscate the freight outfit for debt. The bearded freighter hated the gambler's guts. But just the same, Lant figured he was to blame for getting Jerkline mixed up in this trouble. Even as Chet had gotten that little ink-stained Waldo Leandro Smith into it when he printed his accusations against Elias, McConnico, Jepson and Cato Munday.

Jerkline's freight outfit should be camped on White Horse Creek. The rain had made it heavy going for the loaded freight wagons. There was a wide strip of gumbo flat that would bog a jack snipe in bad weather. Muddy as it was, it would take all day for the freight outfit to cross that strip. There were the deeply rutted tracks. Trenches where Jerkline had had to dig out. Huge clots of gumbo mud along either side of the road where the freighter and his swamper had worked with shovels to knock and scrape the balled mud from between the wagon spokes. Those tracks told the tedious tale of the freighter's heavy progress. Even as the sound of shooting in the distance told a grimmer, more dangerous story.

"That's them. Shootin' up Jerkline's outfit!" Lant's voice cracked like a whip. "Let's git at 'em!"

Ten minutes later they pulled up at the crest of a little rise that looked down on White Horse Creek. And

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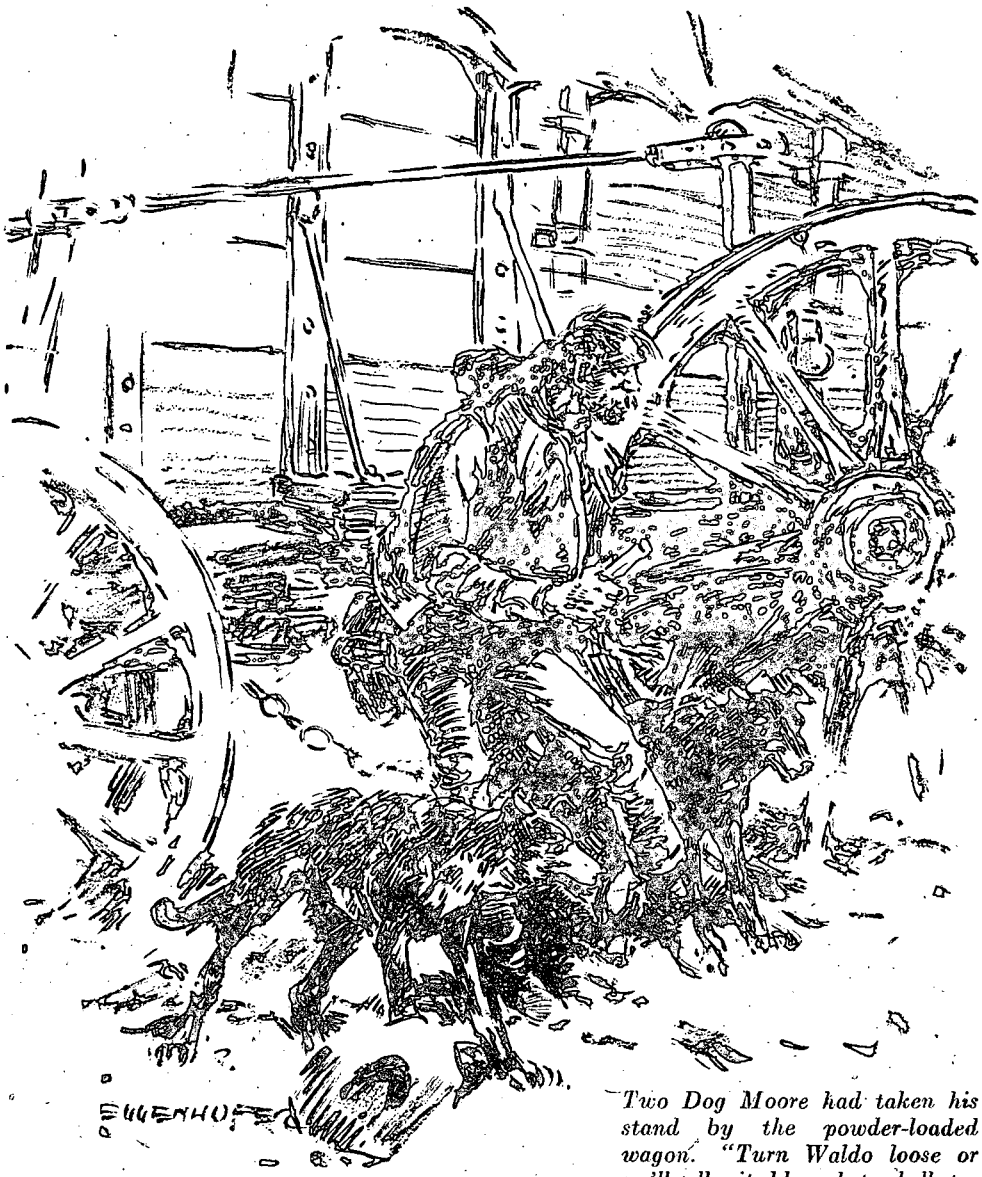
not more than a hundred yards below a tense little drama was being enacted.

A bunch of Box E and Jepson J cowpunchers surrounded the freight outfit. Their guns in their hands, they were bunched up, holding their fire. And sitting on one horse, his hands tied behind his back, a rope around his neck, the length of rope thrown over the low hanging limb of a cottonwood, was the drab little figure of Waldo Leandro Smith.

Sprawled on the ground, in mud that was stained red with his blood, Jerkline Jones lay where he had fallen when he had been clubbed down with gun barrels.



Two Dog Moore had taken his stand by the powder-loaded wagon. "Turn Waldo loose or we'll all git blowed to hell together!" he yelled.

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Crouched in the shadow of the high-boxed, tarpaulin-covered powder wagon was little Two Dog Moore, his two sheep dogs beside him. The little swamper's voice was brittle with stark fear and a desperate, terrible courage. Two Dog, mortally afraid of powder since he had been crippled years ago when he was mining, by a premature blast.

"This wagon's loaded with powder," he warned in his high-pitched voice. "Enough powder to blow us all to kingdom come! I got a stick of it in my hand, the cap fixed and the fuse cut short. Turn Waldo loose and ride away from here or, so help me, I'll let you dirty scuts have it! You've run off our horses. Busted them iv'ry rings and the bells. If you've killed Jerkline you killed the only friend I got and I've nothin' more to live fer. Turn Waldo loose or we'll all git blowed to hell together. Shoot at this wagon and it'll blow us into little hunks! I'm not foolin'!"

Lant sucked in his breath and motioned his men back. Two Dog Moore's high-pitched voice was shrill, cracking.

"Turn him loose, men. That locoed, sheep-herdin' swamper ain't foolin'!" That was Lou Lupton's whiskey voice now, hoarse with sudden fear.

The rope was yanked from Waldo Smith's neck and his arms were freed. He was yanked from the saddle and the owner of the horse forked it.

"Let's git gone!" rasped Lou Lupton. The burly stock inspector and his whiskey-filled but fear-sobered posse rode off at a lope.

WALDO SMITH got up out of the muck. Mud plastered his clothes and there was a smear of blood on his gray face.

Two Dog Moore stumbled from the shadow of the powder wagon. He knelt beside the slowly stirring form of Jerkline Jones. Sobs racked the little swamper and he cussed to the accompaniment of his two whimpering sheep dogs.

"You got more guts than Custer's cavalry and the Texans at the Alamo!" roared Jerkline's leather-lunged voice. "You damned little son of a gun! You Two Dog!"

The lanky freighter was staggering to his feet, wiping mud and blood from his bearded face.

"Here we go, cowhands!" called Lant.

Lant and his Pool cowpunchers charged past the freight outfit at a run. Their saddle guns were spitting streaks of flame as they took after Lou Lupton's men.

The stock inspector had split his big posse, picking only a handful of close-mouthed Box E renegades for his lynching party. The Pool men outnumbered them and Lou Lupton was not the breed of leader to hold his men together against two-to-one odds. The big stock inspector was, in fact, leading his men in full flight. None of them had quite recovered from that powder scare and the fighting whiskey had soured in their yellow bellies. There was no fight left in them.

Lant and his Pool men gave up the chase and rode back to the freight outfit.

By lantern light the inside of the freighter caboose was a shambles. The little hand-printing press was smashed. Everything inside was wrecked.

Two Dog Moore, his pair of sheep dogs at his heels, was looking over the harness that had been yanked from under tarp covering and trampled in the mud. The red, white and blue ivory rings were broken and

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the precious bells had been thrown in the heavy mud. Tears wet the little swamper's whiskered cheeks as he gathered his scattered, mud-caked bells and broken rings.

Waldo Leandro Smith, bruised, battered and mudstained, managed a faint smile. His eyes were bright-blue sparks.

"The big printing press is hidden in the powder wagon. Intact. It shall record in burning words, gentlemen, the blackguard details of this night's foul deeds." He fingered his rope-burned neck and took the bottle Jerkline held toward him.

Jerkline had taken a terrific beating, but he had dealt out his share of punishment before he was clubbed into submission.

"That Two Dog Moore!" he roared. "So damned scairt of powder that he hauls his tarp an' soogans half a mile down the crick to bed down. He snuck back when he heard the ruckus. Hid in behind that powder wagon and made a dynamite stand! By hell, I'll give him money to buy all the red, white and blue rings they got in the harness shop an' all the bells he kin find. That Two Dog Moore has more guts than all of us put together! Drink hearty, cowhands. When that's gone we'll shrink more out o' the big barrel."

He took a lantern and led them to the big cottonwood tree. Tacked to its trunk was the legal notice informing the public that the freight outfit of Jerkline Jones was to be sold here at the crossing on White Horse Creek at public auction. At midnight on this date.

"CATO MUNDAY," said Jerkline, "come along in his top buggy. Elias and Jepson ahorseback. They stopped here. Then Lou Lupton and his men rode up. And Lou tacks that notice to the tree. He acts as public auctioneer. Sells my freight outfit, horses, wagons, harness, lock, stock and barrel, to the only bidder, Cato Munday, for the debt that tinhorn refused to let me pay off last week when you gimme the money, Lant. Like I told you.

"Munday drives off in his yaller-wheeled top buggy. Elias and Jepson go along, ridin' on each side of his top buggy, leavin' that big stock inspector Lou Lupton and his tough hands here. And that tinhorn and his two pardners is hardly out o' sight before that big likker-pickled stock inspector says fer me to trot out Waldo Leandro Smith. And his men shoot guns into the air and the ruckus is on. They whipped me over the head with their gun barrels while I was workin' the best I could with a wagon spoke. They knocked me out.

"When I come alive I see they got Waldo fixed for stringin' up to the tree limb. And then Two Dog Moore deals hisself. And Two Dog holds aces. Drink the health of that li'l ol' son of a gun!"

Lant and his men rounded up Jerkline's horses. And Jerkline Jones, freighter, with a grin widening on his battered, bearded face, yanked the canvas wagon sheet off the loaded powder wagon. Refusing any help, he began dumping case after case of dynamite into Wild Horse Creek where it flowed fifteen and twenty feet deep between clay banks.

"We've hauled our last box of powder, Two Dog," he bellowed, "and you kin take ol' Jerkline's word fer it."

While little Two Dog Moore shuddered, and Lant and the Pool men winced inside, Jerkline tossed cases of dynamite into the creek. Sweating, heaving, the bearded giant handled that high explosive as though he were tossing so many sacks of

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flour into the black water.

Little Waldo Leandro Smith was cleaning the muddy bells in the creek. He puffed his meerschaum pipe, smiling, unperturbed by the reckless handling of the dangerous explosive. As unafraid as he had been when he sat a horse with a hangman's rope around his neck, telling Lou Lupton that he was willing to die a martyr in such a worthy cause. That murder will out and the law would hang his lynchers.

Finally the last case of dynamite was soaking creek water, the last can of black powder opened, its contents poured into the creek. And there was only Waldo Leandro Smith's large printing press, tarp-covered there in the powder wagon.

By that time Lant and his Pool cowpunchers had rounded up and brought in the scattered freight horses.

They were standing around drinking black coffee when a lone rider showed up coming along the road from the mining camp of Twin Buttes.

Lant swung into his saddle and rode out to meet the rider, his hand on his gun. When the man rode within hailing distance, Lant Kilbourn's hand came away from his six-shooter. There was no mistaking that rider. Only one man in the whole wide world sat a horse like Chet Kilbourn.

CHAPTER VII

KILBOURN WAR PARLEY

A STRANGER could have told at a glance that Lant and Chet Kilbourn were brothers. They had the same short nose, longish upper lip and square jaw; the same wiry black hair and clear gray eyes. Chet was just a younger, slimmer, slightly taller edition of the Kilbourn stock.

They grinned at each other and gripped hands. To any onlooker the meeting would have seemed casual.

"Long time no see you, button. You don't look so bad for a convict. Where's that horsehair bridle you was goin' to send?"

"I see you're ridin' that brown geldin' I taken the rough off, Grandmaw. Acts like he handles good. Keep on holdin' up gamblin' houses and you'll git a chance to make your own horsehair bridle at Deer Lodge. I give the only one I made to my best girl. Hell of an engagement present to send her. A prison-made horsehair bridle."

Chet's wide grin flattened and the laughter went out of his eyes. Bitterness had crept into his voice.

"How many Pool men you got that won't quit in a tight, Lant?"

"Just what you see yonder. Mebbe a dozen. What you bin up to now, Chet?"

"I taken a copy of Waldo's newspaper to big Mike McConnico. We've shore got those wolves snappin' at one another's throats."

"Lou Lupton had a rope around Waldo Leandro Smith's neck. Was there enough proof in that sack of stuff to back what that little ink-stained, likker-lovin' rabbit printed in his paper?"

Chet grinned and shook his head. "A gambler like Cato Munday is too smart to have anything incriminatin' layin' around. Your holdup didn't net us much, Lant."

"Then what—"

"But while that poker session was goin' on," explained Chet, "I rode a long, hard circle. I got into Mike McConnico's safe. Then paid a night visit to Jepson's ranch. Went through Anse Jepson's papers. And before daybreak I'd come and gone at the Elias home ranch."

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"You shore got around. But what did you find?"

"Not much," admitted Chet. "But we've got 'em all suspicious of one another. None of 'em knows what the others had in the way of papers that might send 'em all to the pen. They're gatherin' right now to have a big powwow. But that medicine talk will only make 'em more suspicious of one another. They're all guilty as hell. And if you'll read that copy of the Twin Buttes *Tribune* with a careful eye, you'll see how Waldo has worded things so that each of those hombres is bein' made the goat by the other three. They hate one another. Distrust each other. That made it easy for Waldo to hamstring 'em. And don't judge that little feller too quick, Lant. Waldo Leandro Smith don't pack a gun or mix into fist fights. But he's got guts. And likker just makes that brain of his work faster. That printin' press is the only weapon Waldo needs. He's waited a long time and he's here to fight."

"You talk like you knowed him before, Chet."

"He was doin' twenty-five years at Deer Lodge when he got pardoned out. Librarian there. And he got out a little prison paper that's worth readin'. You see, Mike McConnico framed Waldo Smith into the pen to save his own tough hide. Fake minin' stock. Waldo had a little printin' establishment at Helena. Published a little monthly magazine. He owned a printin' and engravin' machine that he invented. High-class stuff. Like he'd take a Charlie Russell paintin' and bring out every color and little detail in his print.

"So Mike McConnico had Waldo Smith print his mining-stock certificates. Fancy-lookin' with a gold miner workin' a crick with his pan and shovel and pick. Shore handsome. He paid the printin' bill with minin' stock. Sold Waldo more stock. Took Waldo into the company. Made him vice president and treasurer at one of those secret meetings where only McConnico and his crooked shyster lawyer were present and the other stockholders voted by proxy. The slickest, trickiest kind of work.

"Cato Munday was in on it, too. And when the law bore down, Mike McConnico and Munday stepped out from under and left little Waldo Leandro Smith bearin' the load.

"Waldo Smith loved his printin' outfit. His little magazine with its handsome pictures was his pet pony. He had no business head. He was almighty bewildered when he found himself charged with grand larceny and sent to Deer Lodge. It broke him. His wife died. His daughter went to work teachin' school. And there in the pen, Waldo Leandro Smith got his bearings. When he found out I was from this part of Montana, we kind o' made war medicine. Waldo's daughter got a pardon out o' the governor. I saddled a horse and rode off. Between us we aimed to smoke McConnico and Munday, Elias and Jepson out of their wolf hole into the open. Now let's git that Pool outfit of yours in a fightin' humor. And we'll go on a wolf hunt."

THEY rode on down to the freight outfit. Chet Kilbourn tossed Waldo Smith a bulky package.

"There's your mining stock, Waldo," he said. "All of it. Assay reports. Monthly, quarterly and yearly reports of the Twin Buttes Mining Co. The mining stock that was once declared plumb worthless.

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Now it's one of the richest gold mines in Montana. They've taken a million out of it since you went to the pen. The law will hand you that back on a gold platter. Two Dog Moore and Jerkline Jones know the property. They discovered it. McConnico flimflammed 'em out of it. Proceeds from that mine kept Elias and Jepson from goin' broke when the hard winter cleaned 'em out. They were all in on the big steal. You're a bloated millionaire now, Waldo. You might git generous-hearted and cut Two Dog and Jerkline in on a few of them gold-edged shares. By the way, Rosemary sent her love and said for you to take a little quinine along with your likker, this dampish weather."

Lant winced inside. Rosemary Smith was the little tawny-haired, brown-eyed schoolmarm at Twin Buttes. The girl Lant had hoped to marry.

"Rosemary is Waldo's daughter," Chet answered the question in Lant's eyes. "She got my horsehair bridle. Now let's git started on that wolf hunt."

Jerkline and Two Dog were uncoupling the lead wagon that had been loaded with powder. They were loading the powder wagon with grub and some whiskey and coupling on the caboose. The other wagons would be left here. He was dropping trail, Jerkline swore, for the first time in his life. Headed for the Kilbourn ranch till the war was over.

Then Lant and Chet Kilbourn and the Pool cowpunchers rode off into the night on what Chet called the big wolf hunt.

They had been gone an hour or more when Sheriff Puck Powers and the older Pool men rode up to the deserted loaded freight wagons that were bogged to the hubs in the road.

CHAPTER VIII

GUN-SMOKE PASEAR

LANT and Chet Kilbourn savvied each other. They looked alike. Their voices sounded alike at times. And while they went at things differently, their main ideas teamed up fairly well. And though neither of them would ever admit it, each admired in the other the traits that were so widely different and sometimes antagonistic.

Lant, older, steadier-going, liked to get things planned out, make certain that he was absolutely right, then go ahead and let nothing this side of hell stop him. Chet called him Ol' Grandmaw. Lant Kilbourn was the best man with a beef herd in that part of the country. Handling a big herd of beef steers is a job that takes savvy if you want to keep tallow on your steers. Lant walked-grazed a beef herd. And when he worked a herd he cut his cattle out, so easily and with such little effort that they said of him he could cut cattle all day without changing horses or sweating the cow horse he forked. That was an exaggerated cow-country way of saying that Lant Kilbourn was a cowman and a top hand.

Chet, on the other hand, hated beef work. Day herd was punishment. The temptation to throw lazy loops at the heels of those big steers was just too much. They said of Chet that he always had a loop cooked. If there came up the ghost of the slightest excuse to rope anything, Chet was swinging that loop of his. And it was a loop that rarely missed. And he never rode a gentle horse. Chet Kilbourn was a bronc rider and loved it. He bought every outlawed horse he could find and took the buck out of them. Absolutely without fear of a horse, when

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he was thrown he dusted himself off and tried again. He kept on trying until he had his bronc ridden, and he did it without fighting the horse, without once losing his temper or his nerve. And before long he would be riding that bronc with a loose rein, roping at little bunches of sagebrush or greasewood, whistling or humming, talking a lot of nonsense to the green bronc until that horse quit spooking and fighting its head and got used to whatever Chet was doing in the way of roping or twisting sideways in his saddle to untie his slicker and put it on. And when Chet Kilbourn finished with a bronc in his rough string, a clumsy green hand could ride the horse. Chet turned over his rough string of broncs only after they were rope-broke, slicker-broke, limber-necked cow horses and fit to put in any top hand's string. He never broke a bronc's spirit.

"Saddle 'em on a cold mornin' and they'll have a hump in their backs," Chet would say. "If you can't set 'em a few crow-hoppin' jumps you'd better ride the bed wagon or git a sheepherdin' job."

Chet Kilbourn would saddle a bronc and swing up in the saddle without untracking the horse to see if there was any buck in him, while Lant or any other cowpuncher would never fork a horse that was just saddled unless he'd led him a few steps to "see what he'd do. What he had in mind."

"Waldo," Chet said as he and Lant rode at the head of the bunch of cowpunchers, "has those wolves smoked out. They're gathered now at the Hog Ranch for their war talk. They've got Lou Lupton and a bunch of tough hands with 'em. Before daybreak we kin ride down on 'em and take the fight to 'em. Cut 'em down, Lant."

"We're in Montana," Lant replied, "and Puck Powers is the law. I wish he was along."

"Bill Elias," said Chet, "has been mixed up in cattle wars before. And Anse Jepson quit Wyoming, between sundown and dark, fetchin' Lou Lupton with him when he came. Mike McConnico was mixed up in trouble in Nevada and the Coeur d'Alene mining country with a bunch of hard-rock dynamiters. Cato Munday has a snake trail that's blood-spattered. I found out a lot at Deer Lodge prison, pardner. And the only way to whip that wolf pack is to kill 'em off. You ain't slowin' up on me, Grandmaw?" Chet's grin took the sting out of his words.

Lant shook his head and grinned back. "No, button, I ain't slowin' up. But that daddy of ours was Sheriff Jake Kilbourn and he believed in the law. I'd hate to have Jake Kilbourn lay restless in his grave, kid."

"Jake Kilbourn got shot in the back," said Chet.

"I'm not forgettin' that, Chet. I'd like to be plumb certain you're right about this wolf hunt."

"You've never stood trial on a framed-up cattle thief charge!" Chet's voice was bitter. "You've never had your clothes taken away and bin handed a number instead of a name and a prison suit and a convict haircut and a prison picture taken to file away in the records. You've never had a price put on your scalp. Never. I broke prison to come back here, feller. And I didn't come back here to play mumbly-peg!"

CHET would have ridden away alone in a hotheaded, lone-handed rush if Lant had not stopped him.

"We're brothers, Chet. I'm ridin'

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with you. Don't ride your horse down before we git there. You certain they're at the Hog Ranch?"

The deadly quietness of Lant's voice pulled Chet up short. Made him feel young and off-balance and ashamed of his hot outburst.

"We wear the same kind of spurs, Lant," he said, grinning again, "but we use 'em different. Yeah, they're gatherin' at the Hog Ranch. I spotted 'em as I rode past there. You're ramroddin' this layout, pardner, and you'll git the job done right. But it's my notion that we'd better take the fight right to 'em before they git organized strong. Right now those four wolves are barin' their teeth at one another, suspicious and ready to snap. Cato Munday is their pack leader and they don't know what he lost to you out o' that safe. They got that tinhorn sport worried. It'll be to our advantage to move in on 'em before they talk things over and patch up their differences."

Lant nodded. Chet had two canvas sacks, their contents bulky, tied on his saddle. One was the sack that held the loot from the Owl safe. The other, Chet said, was what he'd taken from McConnico, Elias and Jepson.

"I kept out a few items," Chet grinned, "like that minin' stock I handed over to Waldo. The notes, mortgages, I O U's and such that Cato Munday held against us, I made into a bonfire. But the money and such truck is in these sacks. Rosemary is keepin' a few incriminatin' papers hid out so, in case we lose, she'll have somethin' to fight 'em with. She's a game gal. She's bin workin' all this time to git the goods on Mike McConnico. That's why she taken that schoolmarm job. They never connected her with Waldo Smith. Rosemary was just another Miss Smith."

Lant said nothing. Chet was more Rosemary's kind. Chet had a way with girls. They fell for his bronc-riding swagger.

Lant remembered that just before Chet had been yanked up on that cattle-rustling charge, Puck Powers' red-headed daughter, Toby, had been the girl Chet was riding fifty miles to see. He had given Toby Powers a pinto pony and a silver-mounted bridle he had won as a bronc-riding prize at some rodeo.

Lant had none of his younger brother's swagger and grin and line of joshing talk. He was not a fancy dresser like Chet. Chet was the best dancer around this part of the cow country. Lant always felt a little awkward and clumsy and shy around women. His face got red and he sweated a lot at dances and he couldn't learn any fancy stepping.

In his slower, steady-going, inarticulate way, he had paid court to Rosemary Smith at Twin Buttes. She hadn't talked much about Chet, although she had danced a few times with him before he got sent to the pen. But this business of her being engaged to marry Chet was a gut shot to Lant. Lant hadn't gotten up the courage to ask Rosemary to be his wife. And anyhow things had been too unsettled to think about asking a girl to marry him. Lant had some grim and dangerous chores to tend to. If and when he got them done, he'd figured, that would be time enough to think about a wife.

But that Chet! An escaped convict, a price on his head, and the best he could offer in the way of a gift was a prison-made horsehair bridle, asking Rosemary Smith to be his wife. And that little golden-haired, dark-eyed, quiet-mannered schoolmarm had taken Chet up on

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it. Or so Chet was leading him to believe. It didn't seem fair to the girl. Not quite straight and honorable.

"Pull your head up, Grandmaw," grinned Chet. "Yonder's the Hog Ranch lights."

CHAPTER IX

HOT LEAD FOR RANGE WOLVES

THERE were no hogs, never had been any hogs, at the Hog Ranch. Jerkline claimed the stage station got its name from the slovenly condition of the place and the grub put out to paying passengers on the stagecoach and other travelers who stopped there for a meal. The stock tender was usually a married man. He tended the stage stock and tended bar at the little log saloon. More than often he would be a squaw man and his wife would cook and serve meals. The grub would be as bad as the rotgut whiskey. Hog slop. Hence the name Hog Ranch.

Cato Munday and Mike McConnico owned the stage line and had the contract for hauling the mail between Cottonwood and Twin Buttes. They now owned the Hog Ranch. A squaw man and his Cree wife ran the place. The Cree squaw was a better than average cook. The man was close-mouthed, surly, watchful and suspicious. When Cato Munday or McConnico showed up with Elias and Jepson for a poker session or a secret meeting, the squaw man would take his Cree woman and move down the creek a mile or two to a cabin there, leaving the place to his employers and their friends. They would be gone tonight.

There was a big log barn and pole corral, a horse pasture that straddled the creek and hay meadow, a small log saloon with a pine-board bar, a long wagon and machine shed, a blacksmith shop and a couple of small log cabins where Cato Munday, Mike McConnico, Elias or Jepson sometimes stayed overnight. The big log house boasted a kitchen, a dining room, and a big sitting room with a large round-bellied stove set in a sand box that gave warmth to passengers and stage driver, freighters, travelers of all kinds, in bad weather. Cato Munday sometimes banked a poker game in the log house when some cow outfit was camped near the Hog Ranch.

The Hog Ranch had always maintained a tough reputation. There were slab-marked graves on the hill to prove it. And more than one man had been killed there and his grave never found. Where the stage and freight road crossed Upper White Horse at the Hog Ranch there was a sandy and gravel crossing. But below the horse pasture the far-between crossings were black and boggy. And the bog holes were said to be burying places for bigger game than the hides of "slow elk," which was the cow country name for stolen beef.

Cato Munday and Mike McConnico had done nothing to lift the tough reputation there at the Hog Ranch. Lou Lupton used the place for his headquarters. His notched six-shooter had helped enlarge the Hog Ranch boothill.

Cased beer was sold in the log saloon. Beer and two grades of barrel whiskey. The good whiskey was for Cato Munday and Mike McConnico, Bill Elias and Anse Jepson. The rotgut forty-rod whiskey was sold by the jug or bottle or served in drinks across the bar to all other customers who had the cash or credit on the book.

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CATO MUNDAY, Mike McConnico, Bill Elias and Anse Jepson sat around the big green cloth-covered poker table in the main house. The doors were shut and the blinds pulled. They had a jug of whiskey and a pitcher of water and glasses. But tonight there were no stacks of poker chips or decks of cards.

Mike McConnico, a big, two-hundred-pound man in a Mackinaw shirt and corduroy pants shoved into laced hunting boots, his jowled face covered with a two days' growth of reddish-gray whiskers, his hard green eyes bloodshot and ugly, spat a stream of tobacco juice at the sand box and spread a folded copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's Twin Buttes *Tribune* on the green-covered round table. His big hands, the backs furred with tufts of red hair, were a little unsteady. His heavy voice filled the room.

"There it is, gents. That sheep-brained governor has pardoned that little half-pint ink-slinger. The safe at the mine was gutted. I'm told that the Owl safe was cleaned out and that a night rider paid the same kind of a visit to Elias and Jepson. This damned newspaper, backed by proof, kin send us all over the road. Why wasn't Waldo Smith cut down before he got this thing spread all over the country? Why hasn't somebody cut down Lant Kilbourn? And Chet Kilbourn ridin' all over the country, bold and free as the breeze! What in hell has Lou Lupton been doin' to earn his free drinks? Somethin' almighty crooked and dirty is goin' on. I'm callin' for a showdown!"

"It looks to me"—Anse Jepson's yellow buckteeth bared in a snarl—"like the fat's in the fire. What the hell was in that safe of yourn, Cato?"

Elias scowled blackly and took a drink. His eyes watched Cato Munday and Mike McConnico.

"Mike's bellerin'," Elias said sharply, "won't git him nowhere. Neither will that poker silence of yourn, Cato. Anse Jepson and I had nothin' to do with sendin' this Waldo Leandro Smith to the pen. We're clean."

"Lant and Chet Kilbourn wouldn't see eye to eye with you there, Elias," drawled Munday. "And don't forget that the Twin Buttes Mine kept you and Anse Jepson from goin' to the wall after the hard winter. And before any of you get drunk, get this straight. We'd better hang together. Or, as the old saying has it, we'll hang separately. And speaking of hanging, we'd better take it easy till Lou Lupton and his boys show up. Waldo Leandro Smith should be out of circulation by now."

Elias looked at his big silver watch again. His scowl thickened.

"Lou Lupton," he said, "is overdue."

"He might have cut Chet Kilbourn's sign," suggested Anse Jepson.

THE lanky sheepman walked to the door, opened it and stood there for a long moment, staring out into the night. Then he shut the door and walked back to the table. He poured himself a stiff drink.

"There's only some of our men Lou sent on before he tackled Jerkline," Anse Jepson said, his tone nasal, "tankin' up on Hog Ranch panther juice in the saloon. Lou Lupton better git that job done right."

"Lou," said Cato Munday, "settled Simms. He'll take care of Waldo Smith."

"Simms!" Mike McConnico growled. "Why Simms?"

"Simms was getting itchy-

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palmed," explained the gambler. "Blackmail in his one-tracked mind. And he was drunk and nasty because Chet Kilbourn had slapped him around. When I wouldn't give him any more free booze or pay him money for a cattle-train job he bungled, he sat down at his telegraph key with a copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's little sheet. He was sending it out over the wire when Lou shot him in the back. I tried to cover Lou by getting out a bench warrant for Lant Kilbourn. But our honest Sheriff Puck Powers tore up the warrant. Puck will have to be taken care of. What the devil is keeping Lou? If he's gotten drunk on the job, he's through. Time counts. Lant and Chet Kilbourn have to be cut down. Raise the bounty on Chet's hide. Put a secret bounty on Lant's scalp. Lou Lupton ain't the only bounty hunter who can shoot a gun. Make the price high enough, gents, and I might be tempted to do a little hunting myself."

"Why not?"

The voice came from the dining room. It was dark in there. They had not heard the outside kitchen door open and close cautiously, the tiptoed footsteps and faint jingle of spurs as someone crossed the kitchen into the dining room, blowing out the low turned lamps and opening the door from the dining room into the front room that was lighted by a big lamp that swung in a brass mounting from the ridge log.

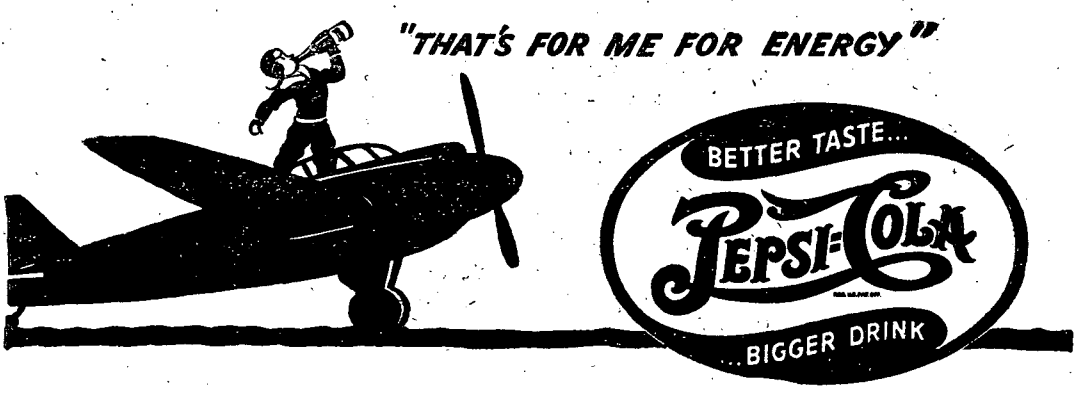
Chet Kilbourn stood back in the shadow, a six-shooter in one hand, a partly filled canvas sack in the other.

"Take it easy!" Chet's voice was hard, reckless, dangerous. "Take it easy or I'll begin shootin'. And I won't miss." He raised his voice. "All right, Lant!"

The front door opened, let Lant Kilbourn in, and closed behind him. Lant had a six-shooter in one hand, a partly filled canvas sack in the other.

Lant and Chet tossed the partly filled sacks into the room and onto the big round-topped, green-covered poker table.

"We're through with your stuff, gents," said Lant. "You'll find nothin' missin' that rightfully belongs to any of you. Your money is all there, Cato. And just for the hell of it, tinhorn, take a good look at my spurs. Then at Chet's. The only real way of identifyin' the man in the slicker who gutted the Owl safe is a pair of silver-mounted spurs with silver conchos marked with the K brand. You couldn't swear if it was Chet or Lant Kil-



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bourn who held you up. You're smart enough to know what a laugh that would git you in court. Sit down, gents, or we'll knock you down with some .45 slugs in your yellow guts!"

THEY had all quit their chairs. Now they sat down again under the deadly steady menace of the two Kilbourn six-shooters.

"You might have a long wait for Lou Lupton," said Lant. "He fell down on the job. Two Dog Moore run him and his tough hands off with a stick of powder. Waldo Smith didn't hang. But the little feller will hang Lou Lupton and the rest of you gents before he's through. Because each one of you has donated enough to the jackpot to anyhow send you to Deer Lodge. You four men murdered Sheriff Jake Kilbourn. Chet and I don't need any more proof than we've got. Lou Lupton's notched gun did the bushwhacking. Bnt you four men hired him to do the job. And I've bin arguin' with Chet along the way. I was in favor of lettin' Puck Powers arrest you. Waldo Smith's papers will convict you. But a hangin' jury is hard to find. There's always some chicken-hearted thing on the jury that don't favor hangin'. So Chet has just about argued me over to his way of thinkin'. A year in the pen ain't improved Chet's disposition any to'rds you gents. It's your deal, Chet. Git it out o' your system." Lant's grin was flat-lipped, merciless, his eyes as hard as slits of gray steel.

"I'm wastin' my first bullet," said Chet Kilbourn, "to put out that lamp. The other lead in Lant's gun and mine has your names on the bullets. We're givin' you two-to-one odds and an even break for your guns. You all set, Lant?"

The grin on Chet's face was reckless and his eyes caught and reflected the lamp light like shining steel.

These were the two Kilbourn brothers. Sons of the murdered Sheriff Jake Kilbourn. The four men watching them knew that they could get no mercy.

In that long moment they tensed, their hands edging toward their guns. The silence was broken only by the ticking of a clock in the kitchen.

Then Lant Kilbourn's flat-toned voice. "All set, button. Luck."

"Luck, Grandmaw."

Chet's gun never lifted from above the slanted line of his belt. His shot smashed the swinging lamp and he and Lant dropped to a low crouch, their guns spewing streaks of flame. The big table was upset with a heavy crash. Four guns in the center of the room spat fire. The din in the room was deafening. No quarter asked, none given. This was a fight to the death. Played for keeps.

Anse Jepson's nasal voice ripped through the gunfire in a rasping agonized scream. Then it choked into silence. Mike McConnico's bellowing, roaring cursing sloughed off into a cough and blood choked the cough into an ugly death rattle that sounded odd in the deafening roar of guns.

Elias rushed the back door and Chet's reckless laugh filtered through the din as he shot Elias down. Then Chet's laughter checked suddenly in a quick gasp as if he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

Lant had been jerked around and onto his knees when a .45 slug tore through his shoulder. Then he felt a thudding, burning rip in his thigh. He had shot three times. He was saving those other three bullets. His eardrums seemed shattered, deafened by the heavy gunfire inside the log

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walls. His head seemed clogged and the acrid powder smoke was choking him. He felt no pain, but he knew that he had been hit twice and was badly wounded. His brain was as thick as the blackness that was choked with powder smoke and vibrating with gun echoes. He tried to think. Count. Three shots. One had hit Jepson. The other, his first shot, should have gotten the gambler. But just as Chet's bullet had smashed the lamp, plunging the room into sudden darkness, Cato Munday had thrown himself in behind McConnico as big Mike upset the table. And so Lant had a hunch his shot had missed. That it had been the gambler's bullet that had hit him in the shoulder. And somewhere inside this shambles of death Cato Munday was moving cautiously, silently, toward that front door.

THE shooting stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Out of that powder-smoke-filled blackness Chet's voice sounded hoarse, strained.

"Lant!"

"Lay low, button!"

"So long . . . Lant . . . Grandmaw. Luck—"

Lant's heart shriveled as he heard Chet's voice fade into a whisper.

Off to his left Lant heard a cautious movement. That would be Cato Munday. The gambler had heard Chet, heard his voice fade into a thin whisper. The tinhorn would be going out the back way now that Chet was no longer there with a gun in his hand to block Munday's passage.

Lant staggered to his feet. He stumbled and fell over a dead man. A gun spat flame and the bullet whined past his head. Lurching to his feet, Lant charged. A gun exploded almost in his face. Burning powder stung his face, half-blinded him. He stumbled like a drunken man, and when his gun barrel shoved against something yielding he pulled the trigger. Cato Munday's hoarse cry of agony struck Lant in the face. He kept going. Stumbled into the gambler. And as they crashed to the floor, Lant, his left arm dangling uselessly, his gun probing in the dark, felt his gun hand touch the gambler's face. He poked with the gun again. Quickly. Blindly. Its muzzle shoved against something. As Cato Munday screamed, Lant pulled the trigger. The gun roared in his ears. There was no longer a scream. Only bullet-torn flesh and bone where the scream had come from.

Like a man in a nightmare, Lant heard shooting outside. Then both the front and back doors were smashed open. Lant's gun was empty. He could not reload because his left hand dangled uselessly from a bullet-smashed shoulder. In the darkness he counted the shots he had fired. Empty? Not quite. One bullet, one cartridge left . . . for Lou Lupton. Play possum, play dead till there was a light lit and Lou Lupton bent over him. Then kill that glory-hunter murderer with his last shot. Play possum.

"Strike a light! There's candles somewhere. That's it. Mr. Devil in hell!"

CHAPTER X

SUNRISE CLEAN-UP

LANT KILBOURN felt his senses reeling. He was past the shock stage now and pain was tearing at him and he felt sick. His ears were clogged and whoever owned that voice sounded miles away. Lant lay on his right side, his gun cocked in his hand. He opened his eyes to slits. There was a flickering light

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in the room, but Lant could not make out the men who were no more than moving shadows in a dull red haze.

Then a man bent over Lant and grabbed him by his wounded shoulder. That would be Lou Lupton. Let him have it. Lant used the last of his strength to twist his right arm around and pull the trigger.

A quick-moving heavy hand slapped the gun out of his hand as it went off, the recoil throwing the weapon spinning in the air.

Then Lant heard Sheriff Puck Powers' voice. Cussing. "Thought you was dead. You're bloody enough to be dead. Damn near shot me in the belly. Now where in blazes is that doctor?"

Puck was wiping the blood out of Lant's eyes. Lant forced a twisted grin.

"Take a look at Chet. Tell the doc to look at Chet—"

Then Lant's eyes closed and he passed out. And when he woke up again he was bandaged and there was the taste of whiskey in his mouth. He was undressed and in bed between sheets.

"Doctor's orders or not, ma'am, good likker is what'll pull them two Kilbourn boys through."

"Whiskey is a cure all. I know, sheriff. It's my father's gospel."

Lant got his eyes pried open. He saw Sheriff Puck Powers standing by the bed, a bottle in his hand. And on the other side stood Rosemary Smith, dressed in white.

"Chet!" Lant's voice was no more than a croaking whisper.

"Chet's going to live. Lant, you've got to fight now. For us, Lant!"

Rosemary's eyes were tear-dimmed and her lips were against his face and her hands were smoothing back his sweat damp hair.

"You bin runnin' off at the head," Puck Powers told Lant with a grin, "like a damn magpie. Out o' your head. But there was no doubtin' your true meanin'. I'll take a nip of this pain reducer into the other cabin where Chet is frettin' about you. You got what it takes to put you back on your laigs, and it ain't likker. I got Lou Lupton, Lant. Paid off Jake Kilbourn's debt. Take care of Lant, ma'am. And directly your daddy shows up, I'll let you know."

Puck was easing out the door with the bottle when Lant's voice halted him.

"Tell me about it, Puck." He hung onto Rosemary's hand. "How it tallies up."

"The Pool cowpunchers backed your play, Lant. They had those fellers in the saloon hollerin' 'uncle' when we showed up. We got slowed up a few minutes when we jumped Lou Lupton and his bunch. We wiped up Lou and his tough hands and come on. Lou, I reckon, was scared to show up here with his bad news. And I had a bench warrant for him. I'd stopped at the railroad station at Cottonwood. The barber takin' Simms' place showed me a copy of the last message Simms clicked out on his telegraph key. He'd sighted Lou with a gun a-comin'. His last message, on top of the stuff he'd bin sendin' from Waldo Smith's paper was this: 'Lou Lupton is coming to kill me. Cato Munday sent him.'

"The Pool outfit lost a man or two. The jail at Cottonwood won't hold but a half dozen. So I give them Box E and Jepson J cowhands a few hours to quit the country. They hightailed it.

"With Cato Munday and Mike McConnico and Elias and Jepson dead, you Pool men kin divide them two big outfits among yourselves,"

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Puck went on. "From the talk outside, the Pool is lettin' you and Chet buy the Box E at the sheriff's sale for about a dollar and a round of drinks. They'll bid in the Jepson J at about the same figure. The Twin Buttes Mine goes to Waldo Leandro Smith and his daughter, though Waldo is cuttin' Jerkline Jones and Two Dog Moore in as pardners. They were talkin' it over when I overtaken 'em along the road. I told 'em to foller me here. They'll be along directly. That's about the size of the news—"

Lant told Puck to wait a minute. "You actually ramrodded this whole thing, Puck. If we're dividin' the spoils—"

"Cato Munday," cut in Powers, "beat me to this stage line and mail contract. I had a good saloon business till his Owl started up. I'm takin' over the stage line and Hog Ranch and I'm turnin' the Owl into a high-class saloon. I'm one of those old cowhands whose night-guardin' hours was spent figgerin' how I'd git me a good saloon and settle down. And it looks like I'll be sheriff another term. Now I got to deliver a telegram I've bin holdin' for Chet. It's from the warden at Deer Lodge, telling Chet that his pardon come through the day he pulled out. But the warden wants to know kin he come back to the prison ranch for a week or two and finish breakin' that rough string."

Puck sidled out the door with his bottle. A few minutes later when Rosemary was telling Lant that she'd ridden here alone from Twin Buttes because she was worried about her father, and had arrived in time to hear the last gun echoes, Lant heard Chet's laugh. It was a little weak, but it had lost nothing of its recklessness.

"I'll go back and ride out that rough string for him, Puck. He hasn't got a good bronc handler there. How long will it be, doc, before I kin set a bronc? A month? I'll have to make it sooner than that or I'll have a string of spoiled horses to mess with. I'll go back as soon as I kin git around on crutches. I left a half-finished horsehair bridle. Not one of them gaudy-colored ones like I fetched Lant's best girl for a weddin' present. It's natural-colored horsehair, all sorrel mane and tail. It taken a year to collect enough hair the right colors. I had a sample to go by, Puck. Toby gave me a lock of her hair when I went to the pen. And the warden gave me my pick of that string of broncs. There's a chestnut sorrel colt I picked. I'm breakin' that geldin' for Toby. With that sorrel horsehair bridle, and that way she sets a horse, she'll take first prize

THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

Where there's smoke there's fire—and where there's both, mixed up with a heap of brimstone, is where yuh kin help send Hitler, Tojo and all the rest iffn yuh

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when she rides in the rodeo parades and does her fancy ropin'. If it's all right with you, Puck, Toby and I kin git married along with Rosemary and Lant. Sort of a double-barreled weddin'. I kin hear those weddin' bells right now, Puck!"

Lant grinned and shook his head, then pulled Rosemary's face down and kissed her.

"That Chet. I might've known he was hoorawin' me about you. Or was he?"

Rosemary smiled. "Chet told me when he gave me that gaudy horse-hair bridle that he'd prod you into proposing to me, Grandmaw. Listen. Those bells!"

Lant had her shift his bed around so that he could see through the open doorway. Even as Chet and Puck Powers were watching. And the Pool men were piling out of the saloon for a look.

In the crimson-streaked sunrise it was a sight to watch and remember. A sixteen-horse jerk-line freight team hauling one big boxed freight wagon and a two-wheeled canvas-covered caboose.

Jerkline Jones was sitting his nigh wheeler. Two Dog Moore was on his gentle white pony, his two sheep dogs trotting along beside him as he rode along, popping his blacksnake. Waldo Leandro Smith sat the high seat of the wagon, his meerschaum pipe in his mouth, a bottle in his hand.

There were sixteen horses in that string team that came up out of the sunrise, every chain tug tight. A hundred small bronze bells were chiming, chain harness clanking, wagons rattling. Blacksnakes popping. The leather-lunged voice of Jerkline Jones, freighter:

"Tighten up there! Hell an' Damnation! Beer an' Whiskey! Nip an' Tuck! Take It an' Leave It! Hay Foot an' Straw Foot! Roulette an' Faro! Ace an' Deuce! Broke an' Hungry! Tighten up!"

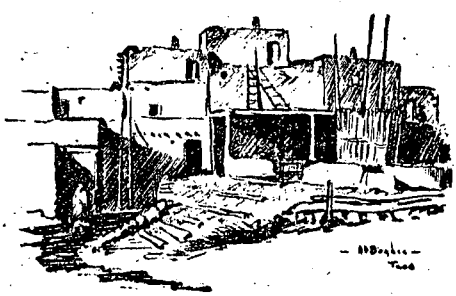
Give them a million and Jerkline and Two Dog would keep on freighting. Give him a million and little Waldo Leandro Smith would stick with his printing press, ink-stained, a little tipsy, happy.

There was something about that string team coming up out of the sunrise, bells chiming, that tightened a man's throat and held him a little breathless.

New graves today at sundown at the Hog Ranch boothill. But this was sunrise. Lant forgot the pain that racked him.

"I'll always hear those bells, Lant." There were tears in Rosemary Smith's eyes. "I'll always remember this sunrise! And the bells of a jerk-line freight outfit!"

THE END



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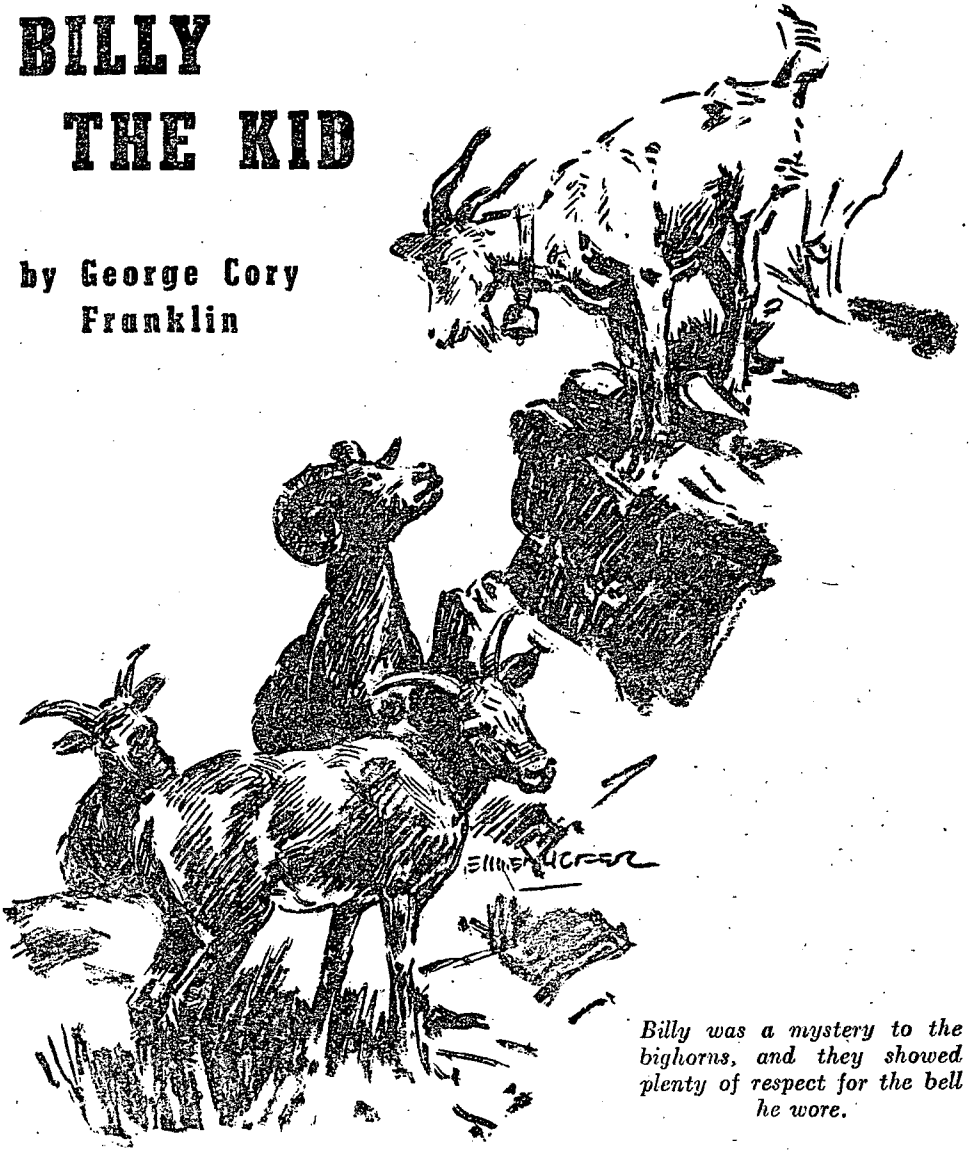
BILLY THE KID

by George Cory Franklin



Billy was a mystery to the bighorns, and they showed plenty of respect for the bell he wore.

THE six-month-old billy goat sprang high in the air from the top of a slab of sand rock, twisted his slim, tense little body into a ludicrous contortion, made believe he was going to fall on his head, and then in the last split second of what looked like a fatal crash, suddenly brought his short, muscular legs under his body and made a perfect landing on his little black hoofs.

The black eyes of the Mexican boy in charge of his father's flock of two hundred sheep twinkled with merriment. He clapped his brown hands delightedly.

"*Muy buena cabrona!*" he praised excitedly; then in the new tongue he was learning at the mission school near the Indian agency at Chama: "Wonderful, Billy! You are one great *rustico*." Manuel did not

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know the English word "clown," so he used the Spanish word that most nearly expressed its meaning.

Billy came close to Manuel to be petted, and have his long, floppy white ears pulled playfully. He was too high-strung and full of mischief, however, to stand still for more than a minute. He turned away, as though he was about to follow his mother up the slope beyond the bed ground, but when about twenty feet from Manuel, he suddenly sprang high, turned in the air and charged the boy, in what was supposed to be a vicious butt.

Manuel had been duped by this trick before, and was watching. He timed his step to one side at the exact moment, and caught the Kid in his arms. The impetus of Billy's body was sufficient to unbalance Manuel, and he fell on the ground, rolling and screaming with delight, and clasping the struggling bundle of white to his heart.

These were happy days for the young sheepherder, and the very essence of joyous activity for Billy. There had been rain, the range was good and there would be plenty of food in the Mexican huts along the valley next winter, and hay in the stacks for the sheep and goats.

Two happy years passed. Billy had become the smart leader of the rapidly increasing flock. The extra food Manuel had teased from his mother for his pet during his first winter had given the goat an advantage so that he was a full twenty pounds heavier than any goat in the flock. As his body grew big and strong, the spirit of mischief that had delighted Manuel changed to wisdom that bordered on human reason. Billy not only led the flock in the daytime but guarded them at night, protecting them as much from their own foolishness as he did from the coyotes and bobcats that attempted to prey upon the lambs.

The Mexicans along the Chama had been greatly disturbed by the reports that roving bands of Indians were stealing sheep over in the San Luis Valley. So long as wild game was plentiful, the Indians had not molested the stockmen along the tributaries of the Rio Grande; but now that white prospectors were invading the Five Rivers country, and killing and frightening the deer and bighorn sheep, the mountain tribes were finding it easier to kill domestic sheep than to hunt game.

Billy the Kid knew nothing of this. He led his flocks into the richest grass to be found in the mountain meadows, and attended to his duties with little regard for the worries of the men who owned the sheep. But Manuel now carried a rifle which he constantly kept within reach of his hand as he sat on a high point above the grazing sheep. He was very proud of Billy the Kid, and had put his entire month's wages—five Spanish pesos—into a small silver bell and a fancy leather collar for the big goat. At first the tinkling of the bell annoyed Billy, but after a while he came to like the sweet tones, and when he discovered that all the wild animals, especially those of the wily cat tribe, were afraid of the sound, he lost no time in pressing his advantage to the limit.

The spectacle of a grass eater chasing a mountain lion away from the flock delighted the sheepmen, and led to the purchase of many bells for the rams of other flocks.

ONE June evening when Manuel went out an hour before sunset to turn the flock back to the bed ground, he saw several Indians sneaking under cover of a pine for-

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est about half a mile to the north of the park where the flock was grazing. There was no time to go to the ranch on the Chama for help, and while the odds were heavy against him, the young Mexican had no intention of losing the sheep without making an effort to save them. He ran to the point of the rocks, where Billy stood guard, and gave him the order: "Marchar pronto!"

Billy quickly turned his head to the gentle breeze, sniffing for danger. But no smell came to him. The Utes had taken the precaution to approach the flock upwind. So far as Billy could see there was nothing to be excited about. The security he had gained when he learned that mountain lions were afraid of his bell made him less alert to danger. However, he had learned to obey Manuel, so he came down leisurely from the slope, just as a bow twanged from the edge of the forest.

Billy saw Manuel drop his rifle, clasp both hands over his side, take a few uncertain steps, then fall on the grass. For a full minute the goat froze as immovable as one of the basalt pillars on the hillside; then the short hairs on his neck stiffened and he started forward. The Ute whose arrow had felled Manuel rushed in, swinging an aspen stick he had picked up. He looked like too much Indian for Billy to tackle, so the goat turned back to the flock that was milling in terror at the approach of strangers. A dozen Indians quickly surrounded the sheep and forced them up the valley toward the back range.

Billy the Kid could no more drift along among the hesitant sheep than an eagle could have fraternized with barnyard fowls. The sheep needed a leader and that was Billy's job. He didn't know where he was going, but he was on his way, and even though the Utes knew very little about the habits of sheep they soon noticed the difference in the flock.

The line that had wavered and broken like water escaping through cracks in a dyke, fell into an orderly column behind the goat. The bell cast its charm over them and the ceaseless din of their bleating lessened somewhat, which was pleasant relief, even to an Indian. The subchief in command of the raiding party sent two warriors up to the front. They were armed with flint-pointed spears which they did not hesitate to use in directing the course of the flock. One jab with a spear was enough to teach Billy the uselessness of resistance. For the time being, he was helpless and he was smart enough to accept the situation in apparent good nature, and bide his time for revenge.

THE Utes had not yet learned the difficulty of trailing sheep at night, and their progress was slow. Half a dozen times that first night the goat saw opportunity to escape from the Indians, but he could not yet bring himself to the point of deserting the flock. By evening of the third day the Utes had lost all fear of being followed, and allowed the sheep to graze along at their normally slow gait. The flock was now crossing the divide between two branches of the San Juan River. There were no trails other than those made by bighorn sheep on their winter trip to the sunny slopes of the low country, but these served the purpose of the Indians very well. They suited Billy the Kid, too, because the walking was easier and he did not have to give any thought to unexpected obstacles.

Dark comes quickly at this altitude. The twilight is short, and a few minutes after the sun set, one

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of the Utes came forward to turn the sheep off into a little basin just above timber line. The flock was tired and they began to lie down as soon as the urging from behind ceased, but Billy went on to a ravine, where he had smelled water.

The Indians were taking no chances on losing so valuable an animal and sent one of their number to bring Billy back to the bed ground. He came readily enough, but he had already seen something that interested him. In the soft earth beside the little stream were hundreds of fresh sheep tracks, all pointing up toward the high cliffs near the summit. If there was another flock here, there might be someone that Billy knew. He was wise enough not to expect to find the boy who had been his playmate and friend, but if any of Manuel's comrades should be here, Billy might coax them to take him home with them.

Billy lay down near the sheep and stretched out as if he intended to remain there until daylight; but if the Indian guard had taken the trouble to investigate, he would have discovered that one of Billy's eyes was wide open, and that his ears turned constantly in order to catch the slightest sound.

The warrior had run many miles that day, trying to make the sheep go faster. He was tired and the quiet that came over the sleeping sheep soothed him into a drowsy stupor. After watching the Ute closely for a long time, Billy finally got up and stood, estimating the distance he would have to run. It seemed a little too far to suit the goat. He took half a dozen noiseless steps forward. Then when the guard moved his head as if he might awake and spoil Billy's plans, the goat struck with all the speed and power in his sturdy body. He covered the few yards like a bullet. The tough frontal bone of his head cracked against the Ute's skull with a thud that would have reached the ears of the Indians in the camp, if they had been listening. But if any of them heard the sound they attributed it to the movements of the flock, so Billy made his escape and was free to follow the tracks he had found in the ravine; and because it is the instinct of a goat to walk on rocks wherever possible, Billy himself left few tracks.

Long before the moon came up, Billy had crossed the Continental Divide and was down almost to timber line on the other side. Suddenly a dozen ghostly shapes sprang up in front of him. They looked a little like sheep but smelled differently. They were much larger and the rams had huge horns—many times larger than Billy's. The ewes had short, sharp horns, very much like those of the goats; and they were about Billy's height, though of heavier build.

The members of the bighorn band, into which Billy had blundered, were curious, but they were all suspicious of the bell that jingled below the goat's neck. Some of the large rams came closer to look him over, but even these great pony-built warriors who would fight a lion or a wolf were awed by the music of the bell.

TIRED from his trip over the mountain, Billy lay down on a smooth spot and began to chew his cud. This allayed the suspicion of the bighorns more than anything else he could have done. The newcomer was at least a grass eater like themselves, and while his smell shocked the senses of all creatures, and the bell was enough to frighten most wild animals into spasms, yet he did not

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appear to be dangerous. One by one the bighorns lay down; that is, all but the two whose turn it was to stand on the high point and guard the flock.

When the sun came up, Billy found himself the center of a complete circle of rams, ewes and lambs who studied him with as much interest as the first white man on the continent must have aroused among the natives. Billy was the most exciting visitor the bighorns had ever had, but after an hour or two they seemed to decide that he was harmless, and they accepted him as an unavoidable addition to the flock; and while Billy was disappointed at not finding any of his human friends, still he felt that he had improved his position. Certainly he had escaped from the jabs of the Indians' spears, and when he got tired of his new friends he could return to the Chama country.

Soon some of the ewes began to show a preference for Billy's company, which made life more tolerable for him, and in a few days he moved about in the band as freely as the rams.

The bighorns believed in keeping themselves fit for instant battle by staging fights among themselves. There was one old patriarch who because of his immense size and the almost complete circle formed by his horns, assumed leadership of the flock. He kept aloof from the mock battles put on by the younger rams for the benefit of the admiring ewes, and altogether dictated their movements. When this ram stamped his hoof on a piece of free-ringing phonolite every head came up alert, ready to follow wherever he might lead. There was but one exception: Billy the Kid, who had never acted from any other motive than his own impulse. Billy was quite willing to join in the activites of the bighorns if it suited his convenience and present interest; if not—well, he didn't, that was all.

The stubbornness brought him his great adventure. One bright September day Billy was grazing with half a dozen young ewes that he managed to gather to himself when the big ram rapped for attention. At the moment Billy was munching some very sweet timber-line moss that he particularly liked, and did not even look up. Even when the ewes trotted away to join the long file that had formed behind the leader, he continued his meal. Not until the last bit of the moss was gone did he turn around to find that the flock had gathered some distance away, with the ewes and young bighorns in a compact bunch, defended by a circle of rams, all standing facing the outside.

Billy stood perfectly still and gazed intently at the flock, perhaps wondering how he was to regain possession of the harem that had deserted him, and wholly ignorant that less than fifty yards in the opposite direction, two bloodthirsty tassel-eared lynx were creeping toward him. Several of the bighorns stamped a warning; one or two sounded plaintive bleats. It made no sense to the goat. He looked down into the green valley and the silvery stream winding from one side to the other; coughed up his cud and began to chew. His world was at peace and he saw no reason for the nervous anxiety of the bighorns.

WITH the noiseless, imperceptible movement of shadows, the lynx crept closer. A quick change in the direction of the breeze stirred the long steel-gray fur and carried the fetid cat smell to Billy. Like a touch on a hidden spring, the odor awakened the goat to his danger.

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His head jerked up and he whirled in the air, the bell around his neck jingling violently.

The lynx had been almost at the point of starting their rush, but the sound of the bell reversed their decision as speedily as the cat smell had brought Billy to an alert. Instead of running from the lynx, as any grass eater should have done, Billy the Kid actually started walking directly toward the nearest cat. He shook his long waved horns, and the bell rang clear and loud. The latent fear of anything they do not understand, caused the big cats to waver. They backed away snarling and spitting. The goat was showing not the slightest sign of fear. If this was a bluff it was the most convincing one the lynx had ever seen.

The short stiff hairs on Billy's neck, the steadiness of his approach, the terrible goat smell, as obnoxious to the lynx as it is to a human being, and above all the constant ringing of the bell, broke the courage of the attackers. Billy was less than ten yards away when the lynx screamed angrily and went bobbing over the grass toward the nearest thicket of buck brush, with the goat charging after them—actually trying to catch animals that could have killed him with one stroke of their mighty paws.

The lynx dove through a narrow passage between two clumps of buck brush and disappeared. Billy stopped at the edge of the open ground and walked back and forth as if patrolling the place where he had imprisoned an enemy. The amazed bighorns faced toward this spot and stood with heads held high, their ears alert. Never in the history of wild things had one small grass eater so completely routed an enemy.

The sound of the bell echoing from the cliffs made the spot distasteful to the lynx. They stopped on the first high point to look back and make sure that the phantom in white was not following them. Then, yowling their disappointment, they loped off down the mountain in search of an easier kill.

After a while the bighorns grazed back. The ewes that had deserted Billy in time of danger returned, and even the big leader treated him with respect. From now on the goat would inspire something of the same feeling of protection to the wild sheep that his presence gave to domestic flocks. He was the accepted guardian of the band.

Billy the Kid might have become king of all the bighorns in the Five Rivers country, but for one thing. He lacked the winter coat that nature has provided for the sheep that live above timber line. The cold wind that the bighorns sniffed with delight sent a shiver clear to the bones of the goat. He was unable to find comfort at night, and even the few hours of sunlight did not thaw him out.

A storm was brewing, and while Billy did not possess the weather instinct of the wild sheep, still he was able to figure out that he could not live through a blizzard up here. He looked longingly toward the protected slopes at the edge of the valley and started out, a lonely little figure, forced to leave the only friends he had. Some of the bighorn ewes followed him a short distance, but the very condition that brought terror and discomfort to Billy meant increased pleasure to them. Their four-inch thick coat of coarse hair made them impervious to low temperature and they wanted the blizzard to come.

When the ewes discovered that Billy really meant to go down to the floor of the valley, they turned

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back and joined the rest of the band. Billy shook his horns disdainfully, swaggering a little and butted a granite boulder, just to show how tough he was. Then he trotted on to the game trail that led through a fringe of timber-line spruce and across a wide strip of slide rock.

SNOW was beginning to fall, but the temperature seemed to rise with each step the goat took toward the low country. Soon he felt the warmth of the cliffs that had not yet been chilled by winter, and slept dry and comfortable in a small cave he found on a shelf above the valley. There were patches of grass not yet frosted, and Billy enjoyed a hearty breakfast. He could hear the blizzard roaring above but that only made his present security the more apparent. He went back to the cave and lay down to rest and chew his cud. Soon he heard a faint murmur that for a moment he mistook for a new phase of wind battling the cliffs above. Then, as the sound grew louder, he stood up and stuck his head out of the cave to listen. There was no mistaking the incessant complaining of a large flock of domestic sheep that was coming down the valley.

Billy's first impulse was to rush down into the valley to meet the flock; then as he remembered the jabs of the Indian spears, he curbed his impatience and kept to the protection of the cliffs, walking cautiously along a shelf until he could see the long line, winding in the valley below, and hear distinctly the bleating of the sheep.

The goat was lonesome for creatures of his own kind, but his summer with the bighorns had taught him caution. He was watching the youth who walked near a large ram that led the flock. The boy looked like Manuel. He stopped to pick up a rock which he tossed at the ram in a way that was familiar to Billy. The goat bleated loudly and jumped off the low cliff and ran down the slope, his bell jingling frantically.

Manuel turned quickly and when he saw Billy, he spread his arms wide in welcome: *"Mi cabron!"* he yelled. "Come here, you leetle *diablo. Adonde va usted?"* Manuel was so overjoyed that his greeting was a mixture of English and Mexican, but Billy wouldn't have cared what language he spoke. The sound of Manuel's voice was sweeter than the songs of larks, the scent of his body incense to Billy's lonely little heart. He kicked up his heels in a gesture of pure joy and ran directly into Manuel's outstretched arms.

Manuel held him close, each throb of Billy's heart telling its story to the boy who knew goats and sheep better than any lesson he would ever learn from a book.

"We found the *barbaros* who stole the sheep, and killed them," Manuel told Billy. "They will never come to the Chama range again."

Only his yearning for leadership could have drawn Billy from the arms of his friend. The flock was wandering uncertainly and it was plain to see they had no confidence in the guidance of one of their own kind. Billy the Kid snorted contemptuously, squirmed himself loose and trotted to the point. Butting the ram out of his position, he stamped savagely on the ground. The complaining note in the bleating vanished. Some of the sheep near the point crowded closer, seeking the protection of a proven leader. Billy the Kid set his course directly toward the old range on the Chama, and stepped out proudly.

THE END

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RANGE SAVVY

by Carl Raht

Some ranchers in the West are taking to the air in reseeding their depleted rangelands. In many sections droughts and overgrazing have thinned the natural grasses, until the range will only support a few of the stock originally pastured when the grass growth was normal. To seed several thousand acres by hand during the short rainy season when the plants could take root, would require large numbers of men and pack animals. An airplane with seed-dispensing equipment, can sow swaths a hundred or more feet wide at a speed of over a mile a minute, thus covering several thousand acres in a few days at a comparatively small cost.

The *"prada,"* or decoy horse herd, is still used in the northern Nevada deserts to decoy mustangs to the home ranch or permanent corrals when none are available in the district where the horses are sought. The practice is to use a herd of gentle mares and colts, in which the saddle and pack stock are also kept, and halt them to graze in a prominent pass where the mustangs can easily see them. The pack horses are removed from the herd and tied out of sight and the *prada* holders hide from view. Riders carefully steal around the mustangs who have been spotted some distance away, and break them out toward the waiting gentle mare bunch.

A wild ride then ensues, in which it is sometimes a question of who will win, and then the wild bunch, by now almost winded, is finally driven into the *prada*, and all the riders close in and bunch the whole herd so the mustangs are separated from one another, thus being more easily handled. One or two of the riders then lead off and the other riders close in on the flanks and rear of the band. After a fast run of several miles, the wild ones calm down somewhat, and are taken to the home ranch or corral.

Generous to a fault, the cowboy would loan anything he possessed to a friend, or even to a stranger. But he was most reluctant to loan his saddle. Invariably the borrower would change the length of the stirrups to fit his legs and fail to change them back again. To avoid the nuisance, the owner of the saddle would adjust the stirrup leathers to suit him, then soak a piece of rawhide in water, after which he cut thongs that swelled in the holes when he laced the stirrup leathers in place. Once the rawhide thongs dried, they were as hard as so many nails. To change the length of the stirrups the borrower of the saddle found it necessary to cut the rawhide between each hole and pull the naillike thongs out with pliers. As this task was more trouble and work than the usual borrower cared to go to, the owner was practically assured that the stirrup lengths would still fit him when the saddle was returned.

Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

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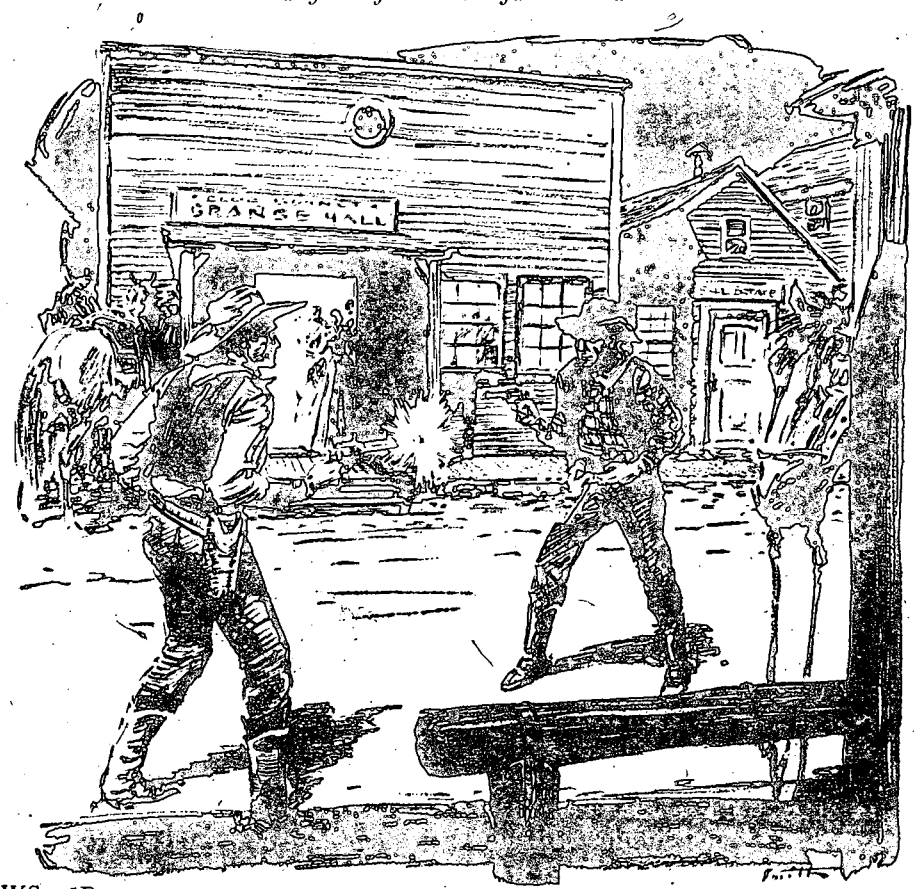
TOO BIG FOR BOOTHILL

by Rod Patterson

WILL MARRINER left his horse at Dunlop's livery and strolled up Blue Bonnet's main stem through the flashing sunlight of the April noon. Scattered groups of riders drifted into town from Lost Man range, and lean, dour-faced homesteaders began to appear out of East Valley, the high wheels of their wagons lifting and dropping dust along the rutted street.

Marriner paused under the wooden awning of the Stockman's House to build and light a cigarette, and it was here that Gideon Blount hailed him from a chair canted back

With the whole town watching from the grange hall, Strawhorn couldn't put off the showdown any longer. His gun roared.



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against the wall of the hotel gallery. "Howdy, Will," the old man called. "Long time no see."

Marriner inhaled blue smoke, standing thoroughly at ease in the shadow of the low arcade. "Been a tough winter," he said blandly. "Seems good to be sittin' the bag again."

The legs of Gid Blount's chair tapped the floor as he leaned forward. "Broken Ax jest hit town. Thought yuh oughta know," he said in his urgent, whiskey-softened voice.

"Thanks, Gid." Marriner was a solid-muscled man, six feet tall and better, with a weather-stained face. He was dressed in rider's garb with an old black hat whose brim broke down in back topped by a pair of pleasant hazel eyes. A red, green and yellow neckpiece made the only splash of color in his otherwise nondescript appearance.

"Jack Strawhorn swears he'll gun yuh down," insisted Blount, "fer makin' that crack yuh done in Red Dog a week ago."

Marriner dragged on his cigarette. "I called him a rustler, Gid, and that's what he is." He grinned at the old man. "Come on; we'll have a drink. The callouses on my elbows're wearin' thin."

"Guess I done talked myself plumb out of a place to stand agin' a bar," Blount said. "It's a dry, tough year."

The two men rolled incongruously up the street—one, tall, broad and heavy-set; the other runt-sized, stringy as an old jaybird in winter time. Will Marriner possessed the poise, the natural dignity of a man at peace with the world and with himself. At twenty-eight he had witnessed too much suffering and too much calamity to expect or dread much. He had wrested a living from this land and a promise of a great deal more; he owned and ran a cattle ranch on the rim of the Sundown Hills, forty miles to the south of town.

Gideon Blount, the town drunkard, made old and gnarled by long, lean years, conversely had lived out his life within three miles of this little cattle-shipping town. He was a man without ambition, a drifter without a wish for anything save a drink and a bag of rags on which to rest his baldish, rat-gray head.

TIM O'ROURKE'S SALOON was filled with a noisy crowd. The two friends shoved themselves a place against the long, packed bar. Gid Blount explored the crowd with a bleary, bloodshot eye and said: "Strawhorn ain't in this mob, but watch the door."

"Drink up," Marriner told him, and suited the action to the words.

Hank Lepke, O'Rourke's bartender, dried a glass and swabbed the bar. "How yuh been, Will?" he asked in his smooth way. "By grabs, yuh smell o' hides and yaller taller, boy, and they's fuzzy hair growin' out o' yer ears!" He leaned forward, murmured in a confidential tone: "Jack Strawhorn's done hit town."

"That's what I been told a dozen times," Marriner said carelessly. "Why spoil my thirst?"

Blount and Marriner had two drinks apiece, then drifted from the bar. The cowman put his flat shoulders against the wall outside and rolled himself another smoke. He said: "Well, pard, I got some urgent business with the judge. Guess I'll just move along."

"I better go with yuh, Will," Blount suggested.

"Not none," said Marriner. "Turn your gun around and look the other

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way. Here." He handed the old man a dollar bill, then turned and sauntered up the street, his spurs lifting music from the boards.

Pacing the high plank walk, he passed other riders whom he knew but vaguely and greeted precisely in that way. He met Mike McGarry, the local blacksmith, at the corner of Custer Street.

"Well, I'll be jab-jammed if the old mossy head ain't busted out o' the hills again!" Mac roared.

Marriner shook him by the hand. "Glad to see you, Mac."

The blacksmith spoke in a lowered voice. "Broken Ax rode in an hour ago," he said.

Marriner showed a touch of irritation. "What of it, Mac?" he said, and walked away. He passed, a moment later, up the steps of the post-oak courthouse and went inside. When he reappeared, ten minutes later, there was a repressed excitement on his high-boned face, a jaunty swagger in his walk. He reached Dillard Worth's Mercantile, three blocks farther on and swung within, the screen door fanning the air behind him.

He stood still, trying to adjust his eyes to the sudden change, for the light was made poor in here by windows shuttered against the midday heat. To the girl who hurried forward, he appeared a towering, big-boned man wearing a heavy Colt revolver, with black hair that needed a barber's shears and clothing that hung to him as naturally as bark hangs to a live-oak tree.

TULSA WORTH, daughter of the storekeeper, stood alone in front of Will Marriner. She was a fair-skinned girl of twenty-three or four, cool, dignified and very self-possessed. Now, however, as she greeted Will, color burned high on her cheeks, and she was no longer self-contained. "Why, hello, Will; I . . . I've been wondering for weeks why you didn't come."

Her slim body swayed a little away from him as he took her hand. She didn't speak again at once, and her face was now clear to him, and it was plain to see that she was troubled, a little angry, and upset. Her delicate chin came up as he looked at her in a hard, strange way, and said: "Tulsa, how have you been?"

Tulsa's voice was clear and strong when at last she answered him: "Will Marriner, you're an odd and nervy man. I've waited all winter for this day, but now—"

His face remained unchanged. "Tulsa, have you . . . don't you—"

"I . . . I don't know, Will." She met his level gaze with difficulty. "You said you'd come the first of March and . . . now it's April first."

He dropped her hand. "I ain't seen a calendar in three years," he said in his quiet voice. "I go by the sun and by the wind and how the calves come in."

"Oh," she said, and her mouth drew tight.

"Besides, some rustlers cut my herd this spring. I didn't dare to leave the spread."

Her eyes were bright and hot. "I'm glad," she said, "that your cows are so important, Will."

He said, flatly, softly: "A man sweats blood to build a herd. His property comes first. After that, he needs the other things."

Contrariness turned down the corners of her full-lipped, cleanly molded mouth. "Well, then, I guess you've made me know just how you feel," she said.

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "You'll be goin' to the dance at the grange tonight?"

"Jack Strawhorn is taking me."

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Marriner stared at her, not stirring, nor showing any sign of shock. "Well," he said, "I guess you realize what you're about. I didn't think you were a fool."

"I know what you're thinking, Will," she said defiantly. "Those things simply can't be true about Jack Strawhorn. He surely is not a killer, as they say. I've talked to him and he's really very nice."

"Oh, sure." It was spoken softly, and yet the words were edged with steel. "And so you've fallen for him?"

"I didn't say that, Will." She paled beneath his intently level stare. "I . . . just want to be fair to him; that's all." She fell silent, then touched him on the arm and said impulsively: "I'm sorry, Will, to be so short with you. But you'll have to wait until I'm sure."

Marriner fished a paper from the pocket of his dusty coat and, not speaking a single word, handed it to the girl. But at the door as he went out into the street's white glare, he turned and said, "You can tear it up if it suits your wish."

Tulsa followed his departure with her dark-blue eyes, then, when he had passed from sight, scanned the paper in her hand. Her breath caught in her throat and she exclaimed in an angry voice: "Well, of all the nerve!" It was a marriage license!

Marriner walked down the street, a tightness on his tanned, square face. He passed Custer Street, the blacksmith shop, Cassidy's Trailtown Bar. Just ahead, on the plank walk in front of the Stockman's House, a group of men stood talking. One of these riders stepped back and turned as Marriner drew near. It was a purely accidental thing. Marriner never slowed his stride, but a sudden quick awareness altered his eyes as he saw and recognized Jack Strawhorn of Broken Ax.

The outlaw rancher pulled back with an involuntary start, then planted his boots upon the walk, a blocky, solid shape in the afternoon's flashing light. His habitual pose of calm urbanity dropped from him and his eyes were as gray and hard as flint. A tension showed suddenly in every flat plane and jutting angle of his saddle-hammered frame.

MARRINER came on, never changing his die-straight course along the walk. And then, abruptly, Jack Strawhorn moved. He broke out of his tracks with a show of imperturbability, swung around on his high, spurred heels and strode across the square. This unexpected action fairly shouted his character to the town; it revealed the utter absence of that brass-faced courage, that lack of bottom he had so carefully and persistently striven to maintain.

It was a trivial, an inconsequential scene to all except interested eyes, but the eyes of a hundred people observed it. This was the moment they had been waiting for—the cowmen, the nesters, the bartenders, the faro dealers, the dance-hall girls—since Will Marriner had come to town.

Strawhorn, in his arrogance and rage, had talked big, had talked loud, from one end of the country to the other, because he wanted to prove that he was the biggest and most powerful figure in this land and could kick his enemies out of it with nothing but his bragging words. But he had passed his threats around like trumps at cards, and Will Marriner had still come here to call his bluff, and everybody in the town knew what the showdown would be.

On the yonder walk, Strawhorn belatedly summoned up all his pride

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and all his hate and bluster. "Not yet . . . not yet!" he called out brashly, hotly, and then slid quickly through the door of the Long Shot Lunch and slammed it after him.

All this was seen and heard by men peering cautiously from shuttered window and swinging door. Someone at O'Rourke's long bar said: "What's all this about? I'm a stranger here." And Hank Lepke, the barkeep, answered him: "Over at Red Dog a week ago Will Marriner called Jack a rustler and it got to him."

On the street the silence held. Marriner ignored the knot of riders before the Stockman's House, passing steadily along the walk. These men turned to watch him swing away, a reserve, a respect on their weather-darkened faces. One man, Joe Keyhoe, of Broken Ax, dropped a muttered oath, then retreated before the silent stares of his companions.

At the wide open front of the livery barn, Marriner pulled up. He stood a moment, as though lost in thought, then wheeled suddenly and back-tracked up the street, coming to O'Rourke's and swinging immediately through the batwing doors.

SHERIFF HOMAN, Harry Blade, and Dillard Worth sat in the sheriff's office at the courthouse. The faces of Homan and Worth reflected worry, deep concern; that of Harry Blade, the local hide and beef dealer, an ill-controlled resentment.

Blade was speaking, his florid cheeks showing the backwash of his emotion. "I tell you, Homan, you've got to get Marriner out o' town, or lock him up. He's yellin' for Strawhorn's scalp and he won't stop till he's busted this town wide open!"

The sheriff's mild blue eyes, made wise by twenty years at his job, swung to Dillard Worth, owner of the Mercantile. "Why should he quit? He told the truth when he called Jack a thief. Dillard, don't you agree?"

"Well, yes," Worth indicated his reserved opinion. "But Will can't prove a thing on Jack. Nobody can. For my part, Jack Strawhorn seems to be a quiet sort, and Tulsa says—"

"I expected that," Homan put in quickly. "Broken Ax spends plenty at your store. At Harry's layout, too."

Harry Blade banged a hairy fist down on the desk. "That ain't the point," he said. "You can't permit a shootin' in Blue Bonnet, Homan. It'd blow the lid clean off and we'd be right back where we was ten years ago."

"What's Tulsa say about all this?" the sheriff said to Worth.

The storekeeper spread his big hands wide. "It sure beats all how a woman will change! Here Tulsa's been sewin' and plannin' all winter for her weddin' day, and today she ups and throws Will down like he was a dose o' pizen. Why, she's even goin' to the dance tonight with Jack Strawhorn!"

"I'm worried about Will Marriner, boys," the sheriff said. "Here he comes down from a winter in the hills with not much more'n boot leather and bacon rind to eat, and now he's buckin' a man who's been fillin' his gut with beef and beans—somebody else's beef, mebbe—and a bad man with a gun, at that."

"Quit baggin'," Blade said angrily, "and do somethin'!"

Ben Homan leaned back in his swivel chair and blew out a long, hard breath. "All right," he said. Then, thoughtfully: "You and Dillard dab a loop on Will and talk to him. I'll do the same with Jack

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Strawhorn. Mebbe we can git both men out o' this tangle without either one losin' too much pride."

HARRY BLADE and Dillard Worth found Will Marriner eating his dinner at the Stockman's House. Blade entered the restaurant first and then Worth came drifting in, embarrassment on his deep-lined face. Blade came to the point at once: "Will, we want to talk with you."

Marriner put down his knife and fork and surveyed the two peace makers out of brown, deceptively pleasant eyes. "If it's got anything to do with Broken Ax, you're wastin' your time," he said.

"Will, it ain't a waste o' time to try to save a life," Worth argued softly.

"Don't you two boys get boogery over me," Marriner said, smiling gently. "I can hold up my end in any fight."

Blade's plump, high-colored face showed a rank dislike for the way all this was going. "Look," he snapped, "you ain't too big for boothill, mister!"

The grin stayed on Will Marriner's sunburned face. "Well, mebbe not," he conceded. "It's in the cards how this will go; I'll make my draw and then my play and we'll see how the aces fall."

"Will," Worth cut in hastily, "your luck has changed. You've done built yourself a spread out there and you've got a couple hundred head of beef. You—"

"I'd have a whole lot more," Marriner reminded him, "if Broken Ax hadn't got to ridin' on my range!"

Harry Blade was primed to argue the remark, but Marriner shut him off with his curt voice. "You got no case at all, my friends," he said. "Now mosey out o' here and leave me eat."

The door into the hotel lobby banged open, and Sheriff Ben Homan came in, closing it carefully behind him. He put his candid gaze on the cowman's face and spoke his shrewdly thought-out piece. "Will, I've got Jack Strawhorn out here. I'm plumb positive there ain't no honest reason why we can't thresh this trouble out in a quiet way."

"Ben," Marriner declared, "if you mean by that I got to crawl, why, you're crazy as a locoed steer!"

The sheriff threw up his hands protestingly. "Actin' like a damn fool kid!" he said, and turned and flung the lobby door against the wall.

Marriner dropped both his hands out flat upon the checkered tablecloth, his wide thick shoulders pitched forward a little over it. And then Jack Strawhorn came in from the hall and stopped, his face inscrutable, his arms thrust down against his piebald leather vest. His eyes were agate-hard, and revealed his caution and deep distrust.

Ben Homan, politician to the toes of his scuffed old boots, began his lecture then. "A man," he drawled, "gits wringy from lonesomeness and talks too much. On the other hand, some hombres grow theirself a hide that bruises from a breeze o' wind. Let's call this whole thing off, and all go out and have a drink."

Marriner stared at the owner of the Broken Ax. "Mister," he said, sand and grit in his low-voiced words, "what you've come here for you'll never get. I called you a cow thief and I'll stick to it. And if I had sufficient proof you run a crooked iron on my stuff, I'd kill you where you stand!"

"Will," the sheriff cried, "you can't do this to me!"

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Strawhorn pulled back, and the skirts of his coat fell open to reveal the heavy pistol on his belt. Hate scarred his face and twisted it. He looked at Sheriff Homan and said: "Ben, you've gone and made a fool of me." The darkness of his face increased as blood stormed into his cheeks; a snarl ran over his tractile mouth as he swung on Will Marriner. "To hell with you!" he said; then, bitterly, caustically: "The next time we meet will be the last!" With the words, he whipped around and walked out of the room.

The silence was an almost palpable thing. The sheriff looked around from face to face, anger and frustration on his own. "Will," he stated in a cold, hard voice, "you've nailed the lid down now. This let's me out."

Marriner, smiling his thin smile, picked up his knife and fork and resumed his meal. The sheriff murmured a savage oath and left the room with Worth and Blade trailing out after him to the hotel gallery. There, Ben Homan turned and said: "There'll be a killin' and the devil hisself can't stop it now!"

"It was a good try, Ben," Worth said worriedly. "But I wish Will was faster with a gun."

Flushed and grim-lipped, Blade dropped his acid words: "I wash my hands of the whole damned thing!"

IT was late afternoon when Will Marriner finally left the Stockman's House to pace up the wooden walk. He had hired a room, had had a sleep. Now he was somewhat rested after a wash and a shave; and he had curried his clothes until they showed their lustrous saddle shine, and every broken stitch and threadbare seam stood out. On his cartridge belt hung his big, blue Colt, with its black bone handle pointed to the front.

It was six o'clock when he entered O'Rourke's Saloon, and seven when he came out again to travel back to the hotel porch. Posted there in a chair in the deep shadows, he watched the town, seeing street lamps flash and lights flick on in every home and shop.

Gid Blount came weaving down the street, a little wobbly on his outsized feet. Clumping up on the gallery, he collapsed in a chair on Marriner's right; he was a trifle drunk, though his tongue was straight. "Strawhorn's at the barber shop," he said, "gittin' hisself all

purtied up. Joe Keyhoe and Mart Stuka are movin' down this way."

Marriner offered the old man a sharp, close glance. "Gid, keep out o' this," he said. "I can handle it alone."

Blount's eyes were suddenly black and bright. "Will, I'll stick to you till hell plumb freezes over and then I'll skate with yuh on the ice! You leave me be!"

"This ain't your fight, old man."

"Blast it, you're my friend," Gid cried, "and that'll be enough from you!"

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"O. K.," said Marriner softly. "When this night's work is done, we'll get blind, roarin' drunk, and don't you think we won't!" Then he went back to scanning the open street, his countenance as hard and darkly masked as a Washoe Indian's.

Gid Blount sat still a moment, hiccuping gently to his vest, then struggled to his feet and let himself down to the dusty street. Marriner called, "Be careful, Gid," as the old man crossed over and took up a stand in the doorway of an empty store.

Guitars and fiddles and steel-strung banjos were warming up in the grange hall, four blocks up the street. Ranch rigs and riders drummed noisily into town for the night's festivities, and now the doors of O'Rourke's and the Trailtown Bar began to vibrate with a desultory traffic.

Marriner, stirring at last from his straight-backed chair, took himself down to the high plank walk. He strolled along, watching the street and the square ahead, and the yellow blobs of light in the windows of the grange hall. Suddenly, he wheeled and cut across the street, standing tall and broad in the full play of light from a nearby street lamp. Gid Blount's voice issued at once from the dark in back of him. "Watch it, Will!" he said.

The red tips of a pair of cigarettes glowed like two bright eyes, then died and glowed again, from the shadows toward the square. Gid called: "Git back, Will, yuh loco fool; you're buzzard bait fer Broken Ax!"

Marriner raised a hand and flattened it in front of him. But the low-growled warning from a gnarled old drunk came like a signal in the night; and it set in slowly building motion the moves of a deadly, creeping game—a game to be played out irrevocably on a checkerboard of light and darkness in the streets and alleys of this frontier town.

THE dancing started suddenly in the grange hall then, and Marriner braced back his shoulders and moved on up the street, keeping close in the shadows against the high, false-fronted stores. He reached a point on the square directly opposite the hall whose lamps threw a pattern of yellow light and shadow on the dust.

And then, abruptly, Marriner swung toward the hall and entered it at once. Back against the wall, he searched the slowly wheeling crowd until he found Tulsa Worth waltzing with the dark, dapper Jack Strawhorn. The wire-thin line of Marriner's mouth relaxed a bit, and he moved deliberately forward, threading his way through the dancing couples on the floor.

Tulsa's glance came to him, then away as Strawhorn turned her, and came right back again. Her face was ivory-pale, her eyes dark and round and wide with a sharp distress. The music stopped, and Strawhorn murmured something to the girl and walked away, elbowing through the crowd.

Marriner stopped in front of the girl. "I'm cuttin' in," he said.

Tulsa did not object, though her glance swung anxiously around the room. When the music started up again, Marriner took her gently in his arms and moved his feet in a one-two-three rhythm across the crowded floor. They did not speak, but the sudden pressure of her fingers on his arm made him look down. He saw the darkness in her eyes, the disapproval and the fear. They were dancing now near a low side

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door, and it seemed to be impulse that made him wheel her out into the thick and curtained blackness of the night.

He closed the door and said: "I've got to have your answer, and I've got to have it now."

Tulsa, her face scarcely visible in the gloom, pulled back. "Will, listen to me. You've got to leave here—quickly, quickly!"

"Why should I leave? This is a public dance."

Her voice shook with close-held fear. "You've called Jack names! He'll kill you for it, Will!"

"Tulsa," he said softly, "I've never run from any man."

She held his arm, shook it with her hands locked there. "Will—do this for me! Get your horse and leave town! Please!"

"No," he said, flatly, grimly. "No."

"Oh, Will, can't you see—"

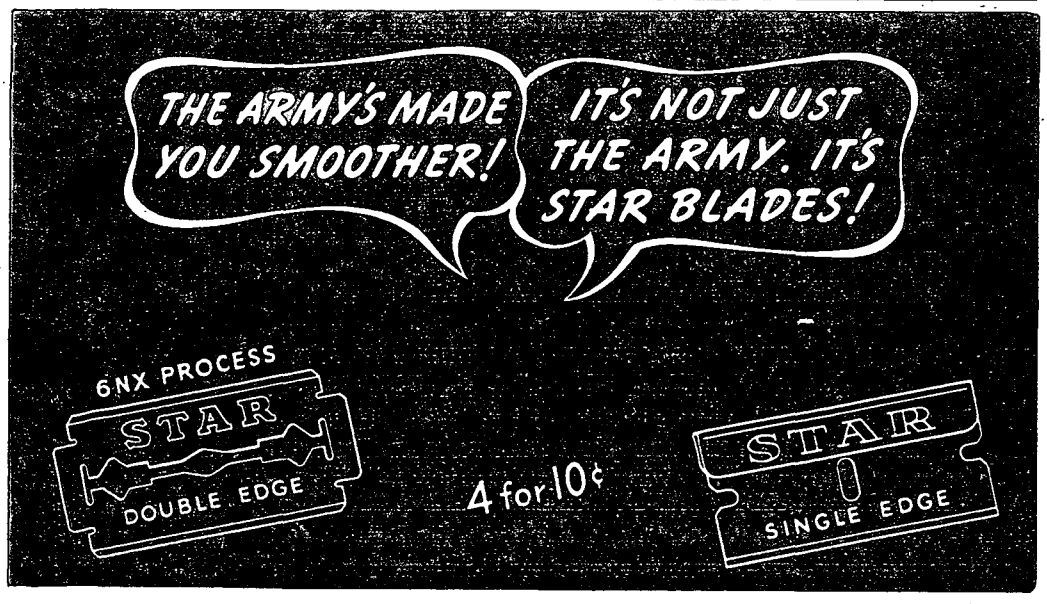
"That you're a fool," he finished harshly. "And you've gone soft on a damned coyote pup!"

She jerked away from him with a low, strangled cry, then rushed back into the hall, slamming the door after her.

Almost instantly, and blending with the crash of the door, a gunshot shattered the night with its flat report. From the direction of the square, boots pounded and high voices called. Marriner hit the street running, his gun out and swinging up. The first thing he saw was a man running bent over into the opening of the alley next to the blacksmith shop, the next, another flattened in the dust out in the center of the square.

FOR the space of a heartbeat, Marriner paused, and then, with sagging shoulders and bleak, stiff face, he cried, "Gid!" and moved forward to the side of his friend. Men were coming in from all directions, murmuring their reports and savage imprecations. Somebody yelled: "It was Broken Ax! I seen Joe Keyhoe shoot Gid plumb in the back! And there goes Stuka and Oldham runnin' fer the hills!"

Marriner, hunkered in the dust, heard hoofs pound down the street



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and out of town. Blount moved his arms and legs and attempted to sit up, but he fell back with a low groan, his frowsy head pillowed in the dust. Marriner supported him, saying: "It's all right, Gid."

"Durned tootin' . . . she's all right," Blount gasped. "I . . . I found out all yuh gotta know to kill Jack clean and legal, Will." He coughed down deep and choked. "Harry Blade's . . . been playin' Strawhorn's dirty game . . . jest like I thought. I busted into Harry's warehouse, pard, and . . . found a stack o' fresh green hides." He stopped to suck in a long, deep breath, went on, slowly now: "Will . . . them hides was peeled from your cows. Your . . . brand is on 'em—all!"

A voice called: "Harry Blade!"

Marriner's face was grim, strained. "Gid," he murmured, "you're aces, back to back."

"We was pardners, son."

Marriner looked down, seeing the cool dull cloud drift into Gid's black eyes; and he knew that his friend was heading West. He held the old man's head against his chest and said: "I won't forget it, Gid."

"Will." The old man's voice was fading out. "Wish I savvied the trail I'm startin' on. H'aint never rid this un afore."

Marriner soothed him with a low, soft voice. "Why, there'll be beefsteak pie, old pard; and biscuits and strap," he said. "And all the Old Jordan a man can drink."

Gid smiled. "Durned tootin', Will," he said, and died.

Marriner stood up and slowly went through the crowd. He stopped on the boardwalk, his hard cold gaze angling down the alley beside McGarry's blacksmith shop. He did not stand there long. With a short, deep breath, he pulled back his shoulders, drew his gun and vanished into the alley's tunneled gloom. In the rear, he swung about, then cut quickly along the drably shadowed ranks of fence and shanty, a grim intentness on his face.

A moment later, he emerged at the rear of the Trailtown Bar, and there blundered suddenly upon his man. Joe Keyhoe was backed up against a high plank fence, a vague hulk in the night's black, spongy darkness. But Marriner had no need to see that stark and maniacal stare, nor the big six-gun. He waited out the silent drag of time, waited blockily for Keyhoe's nerves to crack. And then, as the outlaw made his play, Marriner raised his gun and fired. The Colt kicked up and Keyhoe screamed out his pain and staggered back. He moved slowly to the left, as if to stroll away, then his knees melted under him and he fell down hard and never moved again.

A FAR-OFF voice was yelling Marriner's name. Out on the square, boots went kicking down the high, plank walk. Marriner went back to face the boss of Broken Ax.

The crowd had vanished from the square and the town seemed empty now; it was filled with a waiting silence, a quiet that seemed to throb. Marriner's gun was on his hip, and his arms hung ramrod straight beside his vest. He turned and faced the grange hall lights and then began his march of death.

He was midway across the square when Jack Strawhorn appeared out of the shadows on the walk. The rustler had one shoulder hiked up a little, the weight of his body balanced lightly on his feet.

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And then, with startling abruptness, Tulsa Worth appeared in the grange-hall door, her head and shoulders sharply limned against the light. A voice in back of her cried out: "Git back, you fool—git back!" But Tulsa did not move.

With the eyes of the town upon him, Strawhorn said: "Marriner, I'm ready now!"

But Marriner came on, long legs bearing him slowly through the silver dust. Then Strawhorn knew it was too late for words, too late for anything but lead. Will Marriner's face showed plainly in the murky light; it was frozen, masklike.

And Blue Bonnet waited to see where death would strike.

Strawhorn smelled doom in his nostrils, tasted it like acid in his mouth. He took a backward step, then clawed down for his gun. He fired, wildly, aimlessly, and stood his ground.

In the grange-hall door, Tulsa Worth cried out her fear. And her glance went racing down to Marriner, still on his feet, still pacing forward through the powdery dust. And then she saw him make his draw; the slap of his palm against the butt was loud and startling in the night. But he did not fire.

Tulsa made her panicked cry: "Will—fire!"

Strawhorn let go with another shot, stopped long enough to stare, then fired again. He fell back, gun swinging up once more. A long, echoing report rang through the town. It was not Jack Strawhorn's gun. The outlaw's iron seemed suddenly too heavy for his hand and he dropped it in the dust. He tipped his dark face, shocked and unbelieving, toward the starlit sky and fell sideways to the walk.

THE crowd milled on the square, shouting, yelling the news across the flat roofs of the town. Sheriff Ben Homan came up to stand in front of Marriner. "All right," he said, "you win the whole pot, Will. We've found the hides in Blade's warehouse, and Harry's in the jug."

Marriner was only about twenty feet from Tulsa Worth where she still stood in the grange-hall doorway. He went to her, seeing the remorse, the fear in her eyes. "Will," she said, "Will—"

"You see," he asked her gently, "how it had to be?"

She saw the iron-hard composure on his face, and she brushed away her tears.

"Tulsa," Marriner murmured then, "you're drivin' home with me. Tonight."

She met his gaze, a flood of color in her cheeks. "Will, you—I've been a fool and proud, but I can't—"

He grinned. "We can get another license down at Red Dog on the way. I know the justice of the peace."

She looked at him. "I have the license here." Her hand went to the V of her crinoline party dress. "I . . . didn't tear it up."

"Well, then," he said, "what are we waitin' for?"

"But I must go home. I . . . I won't be long."

He took her in his arms. "I'll get word to your pa," he said.

Tulsa was not quite smiling; there was a shyness in her eyes. "But, Will," she said protestingly, "a girl doesn't get married every day. There's something home I have to get—something I've saved and cherished all these months."

Marriner looked down at her wonderingly. She met his eyes, a tenderness in her own. "It's my wedding gown," she said.

THE END.

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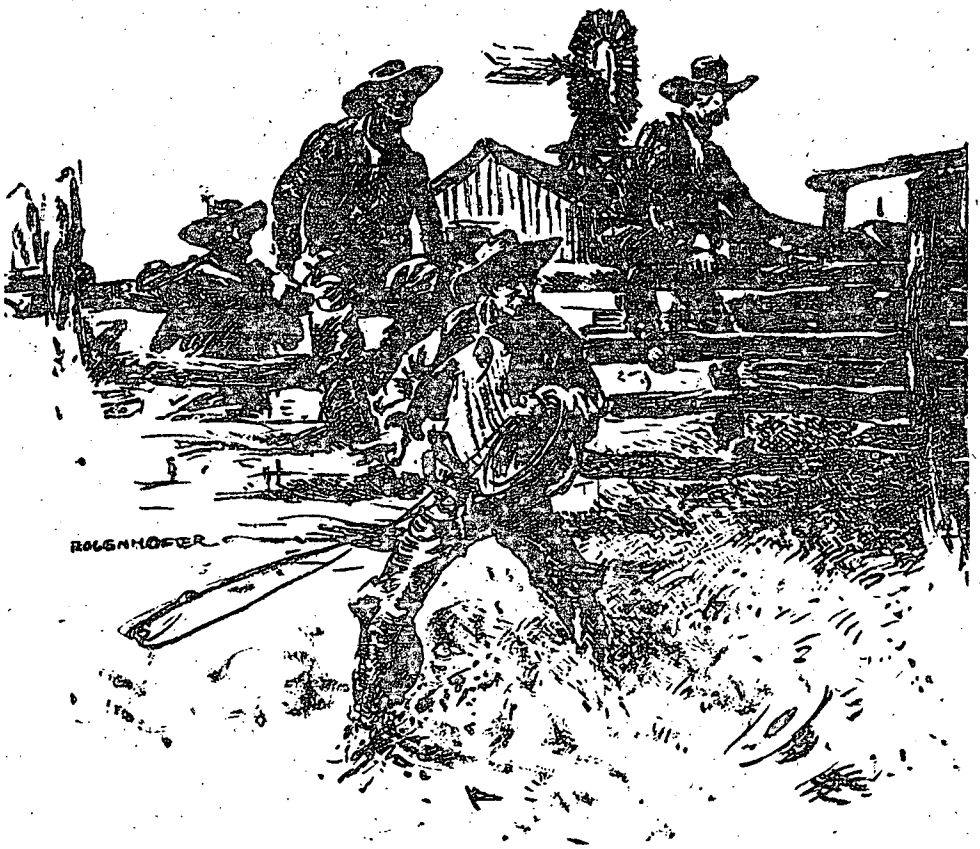
BRAND OF THE



CHAPTER I

THE BATTLERS

When Jess Doolittle, foreman of Bill Deerhorn's ranch, heard the ruckus down by the horse corral, he looked at Joe Rivers and shook his head and sighed. "Looks like Zero's at it again, Joe."

The Deerhorn bronc buster grinned ruefully, and nodded, and the two of them moved around the corner of the bunkhouse where they could get a better view. They stood watching and Doolittle's deep-set eyes were troubled. This was getting to be an old story on the Deerhorn spread. The Zero Kid had tried to knock Shorty Hahn's block off at least a dozen times in the last six months. Always the result was the same. Shorty Hahn was a hefty man; he outweighed the Zero Kid by a good twenty-five pounds.

At first, Shorty had been puzzled by the Kid's belligerence, and he'd given the Kid as good as he sent and let it go at that. But lately Shorty had grown a trifle annoyed by the Kid's unexplainable determination to whip him in a fist fight, and he had taken to rocking the Kid back on

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ZERO KID

by Eli Colter

On the third jump, the Kid lost his seat on the big gray and landed in a sprawl, cursing the stallion's ancestry.

his heels without compunction. He did that now. He laid it on without mercy until the Kid had all he could take. Then he calmly settled back to wait until the Kid got his second wind, or decided he'd had enough. Only this time the Kid seemed to be too mad to have any sense. He waded right back into it.

"Maybe we better mosey over there, Joe," Doolittle said finally. "What the devil has got into that fool Kid, anyway? What's he got against Shorty Hahn? Shorty's as good a man as ever forked a bronc."

Rivers nodded. "I know. It's one too many for me, Jess."

As the two men approached the corral, they heard the Kid howling in fury: "Dang you, Shorty! I'll stomp your guts loose if it takes me a hunnerd years!"

Doolittle frowned. Beyond the untempered rage in the Kid's voice, he didn't know that this particular fracas was much different from all the other rows that had taken place between the Kid and Shorty Hahn. But the Zero Kid's unflagging and persistent enmity toward Shorty was beginning to bother the foreman. He

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eyed the Kid intently as he and Joe Rivers neared the battling cowhands. Zero was still a kid for all his six feet of height and tough frame. Right now, because he was so mad he couldn't see, he was wasting all his best efforts on the calm, unruffled Shorty Hahn. Shorty simply kept away from the Kid's wild rushes and laid it on plenty whenever the Kid gave him an opening.

WITHIN thirty seconds from the time Doolittle and Rivers came within speaking distance, the Zero Kid ducked his head and charged, yowling like a wild cat. Which was exactly what Shorty had been waiting for. He side-stepped, and came up with a thundering right uppercut that caught the Kid flush on the button and laid him on his back, where he lay glaring up at Shorty, shaking his red head and spitting blood.

Shorty was above middle height, but his great breadth of shoulder and depth of chest made him appear inches shy of his five feet and ten. Shorty knew that Doolittle and Rivers had come up and halted a few feet away, but he didn't look at them. He stood there gazing down at the Kid with an expressionless face.

"Zero," Shorty said dispassionately, "you're a plumb, unmitigated fool. It ain't me that licks you, it's that crazy temper of yours. You get so het up that you ain't got no sense, and a ten-year-old kid could hang it on you. When you going to grow up?"

Doolittle's frown deepened as he stood there by Joe Rivers, watching the Kid shake the cobwebs out of his head. It was a crying shame, Doolittle told himself, that the Zero Kid had taken such a violent dislike to Shorty Hahn. Shorty was the best friend the lonely Kid had in the world, if the Kid only knew it; but the hot-headed young fool wouldn't believe it if it was told to him by the Apostle Paul. Neither would the Kid believe it if Doolittle were to tell him that he had kept his job on the Deerhorn spread only because of Shorty Hahn's intercession. Doolittle didn't like having an atmosphere of real downright hatred between any of the boys, and he had known long ago that this was no mere boyish peeve on the part of the Kid. It troubled him the more because he couldn't see any reason for it. Shorty was as ace-high a gent as had ever come to the Deerhorn outfit. But every time Doolittle had decided to fire the Kid and put an end to this continual battling, Shorty had talked him out of it.

Doolittle couldn't see any reason for that, either. He figured if anybody kept tying into him the way the Kid did with Shorty, he'd get dang sick of it, and mighty quick. He bent his puzzled frown intently on the Kid, as the Kid pulled himself together and got to his feet. The Zero Kid was still mad as hops, but he knew he'd had enough for one day. He glared at Shorty Hahn, ignored Doolittle and Rivers, walked over to the watering trough, sloshed the blood and sweat from his face and struck off toward the bunkhouse at a slightly shaky but fast walk.

None of the three men watching him said a word till the Kid was beyond hearing, then Doolittle glanced at Hahn and asked with open impatience: "What do you let him git away with it for, Shorty?"

"Yeah, why don't you really get in and knock the tar out of him for once, give him a whaling within an inch of his life?" Rivers said. "Then maybe he'll let you alone."

Shorty stared after the furious, departing Kid. There was a tone of

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admiration, even a hint of pride, in his voice as he answered. "There, gents, is a kid that has more guts than the law ought to allow. Trouble is, I'm afraid you're right, Joe; I'm beginning to think he's the kind of maverick that has to be half killed before there's any sense beaten into his chuckle head. Me, now, I'm sort of built along the lines of a dray horse. The Kid's built like a cat, and he'll be as quick as a cat and as hard to beat if he ever gets a hold on himself."

DOOLITTLE didn't say anything for a minute. He stood there frowning at Shorty and thinking hard. He'd give a good deal to know just what was the mystery about the Zero Kid. He probably had a name and folks somewhere, but nobody had ever heard him peep about either. He had drifted in to the Deerhorn spread four years ago, like a tumbleweed in a dust devil, a lanky brat dressed in bib overalls, barefoot and with hayseeds in his thatch of red hair from sleeping in somebody's haystack. He wouldn't tell who he was or where he came from. It was Joe Rivers who had dubbed him the Zero Kid.

The boy hadn't known one end of a bronc from the other, and he knew less about cow raising, but he caught on fast. As a matter of fact, the Zero Kid had proved particularly apt in learning about everything, except the most important thing of all. He had the blazing temper that went with his red hair in about twice the ordinary ratio, but even the regular smackings he had taken at the hands of Shorty Hahn hadn't succeeded in teaching him to control it.

Doolittle shook his head and his voice was sharp with irritation. "Hang it, Shorty, I'm goin' to get so dang fed up with this here business some day that I'll fire that wild-haired son the minute your back's turned."

Shorty returned the foreman's gaze levelly. "Suits me if it suits you, Jess. But when you fire Zero you fire Shorty Hahn in the same breath. There's nothin' the matter with the Kid. There's good stuff in him and he's smart. He just needs a little educatin'. But I ain't arguin' with you about him any more. Any time you say the word, me'n' the Kid'll hit the breeze."

Doolittle glared in helpless exasperation. "You go to the devil, will you? Educatin' my hind foot! Joe's right. What that fool kid needs is to be licked till he can't git up off the ground. And if you don't do it—"

Sudden veiled fire burned in Shorty's dark-gray eyes. "Hands off, Jess. I can lick the two of you with one hand tied behind me. You mind your own business and leave the Kid to me."

Doolittle said slowly: "What's that loco kid to you, Shorty? What can he be to you, that you'll take so much dirt off him and keep your eye on him-like a hen with one chick?"

The fire died out of Shorty, and his gray eyes turned bleak. "That's my business. I know what makes him tick. You leave him to me, that's all. Just keep your nose out of my affairs and leave the Kid to me."

CHAPTER II

THE GRAY HORSE

THAT settled it so far as Jess Doolittle was concerned. He kept his nose out, but he kept his eyes open, too. It was more than curiosity where Doolittle was concerned, more than a foreman's natural desire

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to hang onto a top hand whose equal you didn't find running loose on the range every day of the week. He had a strong personal liking for Shorty Hahn. There was almost as much mystery concerning Shorty's past as there was about the Zero Kid's. Doolittle had often wondered what it was. He wondered if one of them was the answer to the other. There didn't seem any immediate likelihood of his finding out.

For a time there was no perceptible change in the order of things on the Deerhorn. The Zero Kid continued to wade into Shorty and get a good pasting for his pains, without blunting the edge of his wild temper and without dulling the blazing spirit in him. Also, he ignored Shorty's caustic assurance that he'd never be worth a hill of beans until he learned to sling the gear on that temper of his and ride it to a standstill. He put on a few more pounds and learned to hit a little harder, but he was still the wild-tempered fool he had been ever since that day a year ago now when he had suddenly conceived that terrific hatred for Shorty Hahn and tied into him with all fours.

Or, Doolittle wondered, had the hate really been there all the time, with the Kid holding it in till he got big enough to try to whale Shorty? The foreman was still wondering uneasily about the whole puzzling business when the carload of Nevada mustangs was shipped in to the Deerhorn ranch after talking to Among the lot of horses was one magnificent gray stallion that stood out like a show horse, well over seventeen hands high and clean-cut as a racer. How a horse like that ever got in among that run-of-the-range shipment of nags, was the first thing every hand on the Deerhorn was asking himself when the mustangs were first driven down the loading chute.

"It's a mistake, that's all," Doolittle said. "He must have got in with the bunch, and it was so dang much trouble to cut him out they just let it go. I'll bet he's ornery as all get out."

Joe Rivers eyed the big gray warily. "I'll take it out of him, if he is. He sure has got a rollin' eye."

But nobody eyed the gray stallion with the hungry look that was in the Zero Kid's face. If ever a man fell in love with a horse, the Kid fell in love with the gray, and Joe Rivers saw it, though he didn't say anything. Shorty Hahn saw it, too, but he didn't say anything either.

AFTER the horses were driven to the ranch, and Bill Deerhorn, the owner of the spread, came out to give them a look-see, there was a little talk about the big gray. Deerhorn nodded appreciation of the stallion's good points, and said lightly: "He looks mild enough on the surface, but wait till you boys try him once. Me, I don't need him none. The feller that rides him can have him."

Of course, Joe Rivers, being the regular bronc buster, got first try. To his surprise, the gray horse seemed gentle as a kitten. He led to a hackamore like a pet. He didn't even make any fuss when they threw the gear on him. But the minute Joe Rivers' pants pockets touched saddle leather on the gray's back, the stallion was transformed into a fighting demon. He knew all the tricks and he invented a few twists of his own. Joe Rivers stuck aboard for two full minutes before the gray sent him sailing through the air with the greatest of ease.

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Joe tried it three times, then he said in disgust: "Anybody else can have my share. Go to it, you buckaroos. Anybody want to guess now why he happened to be in that lot of knot heads?"

The other boys tried it a time or two, in turn, and decided that Joe had the right idea, while the Zero Kid sat on the corral fence watching with that hungry look in his eye. Shorty Hahn said he had a good-enough string; he didn't believe he wanted the sunfishing fool at any price. That made it the Kid's turn, he being the junior hand in the crew.

He slid down off the fence and stalked over to the gray horse that stood there looking mild as a summer breeze, and heaved himself into the saddle. The first jump the Kid lost his hat. The second jump he lost his temper. The third jump he lost his seat, and landed in a sprawling heap, cursing the gray's ancestry and swearing by his favorite oath that he'd ride the hellion if it took him a hundred years. He tried it for six days in succession, till he was so bruised and sore from the punishment that he had to take a rest from the job.

Then Jake O'Leary made his appearance on the Deerhorn spread.

JAKE O'LEARY was, on the face of it, two things: he was a crack horse breaker and a tough hombre. He was built along the lines of Shorty Hahn and looked almost as though he might have been Shorty's brother, but there the resemblance ceased. O'Leary seemed to be in his late twenties, but he had drunk too much hard liquor and it had begun to show its effect on him. He wore two six-guns on crossed belts, and hinted broadly that he knew how to use them. He swaggered and boasted and said that he was a dangerous man to cross.

But he could get a lot of work done, and Bill Deerhorn was willing to give him a chance. Deerhorn said he didn't think Jake would last very long, though, because he certainly wasn't going to take anything off him. The rest of the boys didn't have much use for him. Shorty Hahn didn't like him at all and made no bones of the fact.

But the Zero Kid took to Jake like a duck takes to water. Joe Rivers said, with a disgusted scowl: "That idjit of a Zero likes Jake just because Shorty don't." But there was more to it than that, and Jess Doolittle had his fingers crossed.

The ranch was something like a powder keg, but things slid along for a while, everybody expecting a blow-up any minute. Jake was working some young stuff in the corral, giving Joe Rivers a needed lay-off, and the rest of the hands were out combing the range with the boss. The big gray stallion was taking it easy in a separate corral, still bucking the Kid off every time the Kid tried to ride him, and Bill Deerhorn had given orders that it was strictly hands off the gray till the Kid admitted he was licked. If the Kid ever broke the gray to ride, the stallion was his.

What happened that day was never quite clear, although a man could do some fair guesswork. Jake was down at the corral working his nags. The rest of the men were out with the boss. Deerhorn sent Shorty back to the ranch building on some errand. Shorty didn't come back, and when the men rode in that evening they found Jake O'Leary hammered to a bloody pulp and Shorty dusting off his knuckles, so to speak. Shorty never talked, and nobody asked any questions.

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But Bill Deerhorn told Jess Doolittle to fire Jake off the ranch bag and baggage, and Jake went, muttering threats of revenge.

There were a couple of bloody slashes on the gray stallion's left hip near the flank, but no spur had ever made them, and whatever had been used to rip the gray's hide wasn't lying around for anybody to find. Everybody took one guess as to what had happened, and figured that Jake had it coming to him.

Everybody but the Zero Kid. His hate for Shorty Hahn seemed to boil higher than ever. Jess Doolittle caught the Kid glaring at Shorty and muttering to himself: "I'll kill that so and so. I'll kill him!"

Doolittle's temper snapped then. "Shut your face! Dang it, why Shorty stands up for you is more than I can understand. Cut out that kind of talk or I'll push your face in."

The Kid shut up. And the following Saturday was pay day.

CHAPTER III

BITTER MEMORY

THE whole Deerhorn crew went in to Red Bluff on a toot. In a body, the boys headed for the Antler Saloon to play a little stud and put down a few drinks, and chin a while with the other ranchers and cowhands from the surrounding territory.

But the Zero Kid slipped away and made for the Silver Palace. The Silver Palace was at the other end of town. It was at the other end of the scale, too. It was a hang-out for road agents and horse thieves, and it was no place for a hothead like the Zero Kid. The Kid felt a little uneasy when he stalked into the dingy smoky room and bellied up to the bar. To cover his uncertainty, he looked around with a scowl and ordered a drink of whiskey.

Jake O'Leary got up from a table at the rear of the room and came swaggering along the bar toward the Kid. O'Leary still had a few fresh scars and bumps and assorted bruises from the punching Shorty Hahn had given him, but he grinned ingratiatingly at the Kid and came to a halt at his side.

"I begun to think you wasn't comin', Kid. Glad to see you got here."

The Kid swallowed his whiskey, nervously, at one big gulp. "We was late gettin' started. Where we gonna go so we can talk?"

Jake gestured with his head. "Oh, just come along back here to the table, Kid. Nobody'll pay any attention to us. Have another drink with me. Then we'll slide back there where we can be to ourselves."

The Kid accepted the drink, and they took a quart back to the table with them. Once they were settled at the table, Jake gave the Kid a slightly belligerent and inquiring scrutiny.

"Well, what's it all about, Zero?" he demanded bluntly. "Let's get the cards on the table. When I come to the Deerhorn spread, you shined up to me like a long-lost brother. Why?"

The Kid stared him down, sullen and simmering with anger. "I thought maybe you could lick Shorty, I told you that. If I ain't never goin' to be able to do it, I got to see somebody else do it. I got to see him licked till he can't stand."

O'Leary shook his head, scowling and puzzled. "Well, that's a rum one. That beats anything I ever heard tell of. I tried to lick him, when I caught him beatin' your horse with that stake. But even I

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got sense enough to know when I run into a buzz saw. I ain't askin' for any more. You'll have to get somebody else to wallop Hahn for you. Was that all you wanted to see me about tonight?"

The Kid nodded. "Yeah. I thought maybe, if I gave you the low-down, you'd change your mind and take another sock at him. What was he beatin' the horse for?"

O'LEARY raised his heavy brows in surprise. "Why, I thought you'd of guessed that. Shorty tried to ride the gray, and the bronc piled him. I tried to give Hahn what was coming to him, but he had me faded four ways from the jack. What you got agin' him, anyway? What you got to see him licked for?"

The Zero Kid's face was cold. His voice was colder. "Listen," he said. "Six years ago we had a purty place, my dad and my kid brother and me. My mother had been dead for two years, but we'd got to be happy there again, us three. My brother was too little to do much yet; he was only eight, four years younger than me. But dad and me got along swell and little Gene helped."

"Where was this?" O'Leary interrupted.

The Zero Kid frowned. "No matter. Off over the hills. Then a guy that had it in for my dad got a gang together and raided our place. See? We tried to fight, but what was the use? They was too many for us. They burned the buildings, and run off the stock, they killed my dad and little Gene, and they thought they'd killed me. But I laid doggo, and after they was gone I crawled away, and I wasn't too bad hurt to get over it. A lady in a ranchhouse took care of me. I worked there a while, then I struck out."

"What for?" demanded O'Leary. "Why didn't you stay where you had a good spot?"

The Zero Kid's cold eyes burned. "I went to the sheriff. That guy that headed the gang: I had to get 'em all, but I had to get him sure, if it took me a hunnerd years."

"What did he have it in for your dad for?"

"Because my dad shot his brother for rustlin', that's why. I went to the sheriff, like I said, and him and me got together, and he went after the gang. He got 'em all but the rustler's brother. That feller got clean away and kept goin'. And I took out after him."

"Did you remember what he looked like?" O'Leary cut in.

"Just his general looks. I never got a good sight of his face. But I had somethin' to go by, that my dad told me before he died. This feller looks plenty tough on the outside, see, and he is tough. But inside, he's yeller. There's one thing he's afraid of. He's scared blue of the fists of the man that can lick him. You get him licked fair, once, and he'll spill anything he knows before he'll let you hit him again."

"So that's it!" O'Leary said. "You follered him to the Deerhorn ranch?"

"I follered his general trail," the Kid corrected, "and caught up with him on the Deerhorn. But what could a kid of fourteen do? I was fourteen by the time I located him on the Deerhorn. I had to wait till I was big enough to lick him and make him talk."

O'Leary scowled. "I don't get it. Sounds like moonshine to me. If you know he's the one, what's the sense of makin' him talk? Put a slug through him and call it a day."

"But that's just it," explained the Zero Kid patiently. "I don't *know*. He's got all the looks of the guy, ex-

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cept for his face that I never did see good. He's called Shorty, and he's plenty tough. It don't fool me none his gettin' a job on the Deerhorn and layin' low like a regular cowhand; it's just what a slick guy like him would do. But I got to be sure. He could be another Shorty, and just happen to look like the guy that killed my dad. If I ever killed the wrong man, I'd never be able to look myself in the face again. So—I got to lick him and make him talk."

O'Leary scowled, and filled the Kid's glass. "Have another drink, and maybe you'll be able to see clear." He glanced at the Kid's waist. "Where's your gun? I never seen you with a gun."

THE Zero Kid looked a little sheepish. "The boss won't let me wear one. He's afraid I'm liable to fly off the handle and hurt somebody. Why?"

O'Leary didn't answer. He sat silent for a minute, scowling absentmindedly around the dingy room, at the hard-case men at the tables and bar. He watched from the corner of his eye as the Kid downed the stiff drink, then poured another. The Kid's eyes were beginning to look faintly bleary.

O'Leary said slowly, as if he were voicing a matter he had been giving considerable thought: "That's all bull, Kid. The boss don't know what you got agin' Shorty, or he wouldn't say that."

The Kid drank again, and shook his head. "No. Sure he don't know. I never told anybody. I never told anybody at all, but you, and I ain't goin' to tell anybody. I'm just tellin' you so you'll help me get Shorty where he'll talk, and we can make him own up. Maybe I never will get fast enough to lick him."

"Look, Kid," O'Leary said quietly, "you're just wastin' a lot of time. In your heart you plumb know he's the one, don't you?"

The Kid nodded slowly. "Yeah. I know. There can't be no mistake. He had the nerve to come down to the yard to make sure we was all dead, after the rest of the gang rid off with the stock. I didn't dare open my eyes when he bent down to look me over, but when he went on to look at dad and little Gene, I did open my eyes and I ain't never going to forget him, even if I only seen his back."

"He's got a mark?"

"He has," said the Kid. "He's got a wide jagged scar on the back of his head low to the neck, and no hair grows on it. Ain't you seen the scar on the back of Shorty Hahn's head? I guess there just *might* be two scars on different men like that, but I don't believe it. Sure, I'm sure. Somebody nigh cracked that hombre's head open with a gun barrel, one day. Maybe you're right, Jake. Maybe I'm a fool, waitin' to make him talk so I'll hear him say he done it, when I plumb know that Shorty Hahn is the guy I saw there with the gang that day."

"Sure, you're a fool," snapped O'Leary. "You ain't just makin' excuses, are you? You ain't yeller, too, are you? Damn it, if any man'd done that to me, I'd fill him full of lead the minute I had a chance. Wait for him to talk! Hell! Ain't you got no guts?"

The Zero Kid glared. "Don't talk to me about guts! I got as much guts as the next one. I'm just mad enough"—and drunk enough, added O'Leary mentally—"right now, if I had a gun on me, I'd mosey right down there to the Antler and let Shorty have it, and get it over."

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"That's easy fixed, Zero." O'Leary pulled his right-hand gun and handed it to the Kid, butt first. "Go git him. Funny you didn't turn him over to the sheriff long ago, though."

The Zero Kid reached for the gun. "Well, the sheriff give out that he'd got the whole gang, you see. He figured if Shorty thought the sheriff believed the whole gang was killed off, then Shorty'd think he was safe. He'd lay low for a while, and show up, and the sheriff could nab him. But Shorty laid low too good. I knowed I could beat it to the sheriff if Shorty ever tried to run out, and I wanted to git him myself."

"Well, here's your chance," said O'Leary.—"Your chance to show you got a little sand, and your chance to git even with the yeller belly that killed your folks. Go git him, then hit for the timber till the fuss blows over. Nobody'll ever blame you none for crossin' off a score like that."

"Yeah. I'll git him." The Kid's drink-bleared eyes gazed down at the gun he gripped in his hand. His drink-inflamed bad temper roared through him, crowding out every other thought. He only knew one purpose: go get the man who had killed his father and little Gene. Walk in and shoot him down without compunction. Go get him.

The Zero Kid turned from the table, and stalked out of the Silver Palace, gripping the gun in tense fingers, his hate-crazed eyes staring straight ahead.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE MAKER

JAKE waited till the swing doors had closed behind the Zero Kid. Then he poured another glass of whiskey, drank it and set the empty glass down on the table with a thump, and got to his feet.

A big hefty man with hard black eyes and a short black beard, who stood leaning against the wall a few feet away, addressed Jake tersely: "Quite a yarn the Kid spins. Anything in it?"

"Sure. It's all true. Every word of it. Have one on me, Blacky." Jake shoved bottle and glass across the table. "Only, the Kid sort of got his dates muffed a little."

"Yeah?" Blacky moved up to the table and reached for the bottle. "Wasn't it Shorty Hahn he seen there with the gang that day?"

"Oh, it was Shorty Hahn, all right." Jake waited till Blacky released the bottle, picked it up and drank from the neck of it, and set it down again. "But, look, Blacky. The Kid says the old man told him this stuff, but the old man was dead by the time Shorty got there. So the old man didn't have much time to talk, he must've been mighty nigh dead already, and likely he didn't talk too clear and straight."

"Reckon that's so," agreed Blacky.

"No two ways about it." Jake eyed the bottle as Blacky reached for it again. "Which explains why the Kid didn't get it straight. You see, Blacky, it ain't Shorty that turns yeller and spills his guts when he gits the daylights pasted out of him. That was the one the old man killed, Shorty's brother. The Kid or anybody else could lick Shorty within an inch of his life and Shorty'd never let a peep out of him. But the Kid knows dang well it *was* Shorty there with the gang, so he might as well hang it on him."

"You seem to know a lot about it, Jake," Blacky said dryly.

Jake leered. "Why shouldn't I? I was one of the gang. The only one

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that got away. I watched Shorty go down there and look 'em over to be sure they was all dead, and I stayed right where I was till Shorty went on after the gang. Before I moved, I seen the Kid sit up, so I knowed he wasn't likely hurt too bad. Then I lit out, in the opposite direction from the one the gang took. The sheriff don't know I was ever with the gang. He honestly thinks he got 'em all but Shorty."

There was a puzzled frown on Blacky's hard face. "But, listen. Then Shorty must've knowed you when you showed up at the Deerhorn."

Jake laughed and reached for the bottle. "Sure, he knowed me. And I knew him. Well enough to know if I handed him the glassy stare and pretended I never seen him before, he wouldn't give me away. He sure must've got a jolt, though, seein' me roll in when he'd been thinkin' I was dead for years. But he kept his mouth shut, and contented himself with watchin' me like a hawk. He don't like me no better'n I like him."

"And the Kid wouldn't know you of course," said Blacky.

"Shucks, no! He never got no look at me that day. He's got no way of knowin' I was one of the gang. I hope to gosh he gets Shorty the first shot. I owe that guy one, for beatin' me up like that. I'm still sore all over."

"What did he tie into you for?" demanded Blacky.

"Oh, I thought I'd have a whirl at that gray nag while nobody was around, and I couldn't even get the gear on him. He tried to kick a hole in me, and I went after him with a club. Shorty rode up when I wasn't lookin' for him, and we sure had 'er out, only I got the raw end of it. I hope the Kid fills him so full of lead he'll sink. Come over to the bar and we'll get another bottle."

THE Zero Kid tramped steadily down the wooden sidewalk toward the Antler Saloon. His angry eyes stared straight ahead. He kept telling himself that Jake was dead right. He'd been a fool for a long time, waiting till he was big enough to lick Shorty and make him confess before he polished him off. He *did* know it was Shorty Hahn there with the gang that day; there wasn't any real doubt in his mind at all. So what was he waiting for?

By the time he reached the Antler, and turned in, the gun gripped tight and ready, the Kid didn't care much what happened so long as he got Shorty Hahn. He wasn't the best shot in the world, but this was one time he must not miss. When he stepped into the Antler, somebody at the bar glanced at him, and a swift mutter of alarm went down the bar and around the room. Half the men present turned to look at the Kid.

Shorty didn't turn. Shorty was standing there at the bar with his back toward the Kid, and he saw the Kid in the mirror behind the bar. Shorty set down his glass and stood still.

"I'm goin' to blow your brains out, you dirty killer!" the Kid snarled at him. "Turn around. I wouldn't even shoot a skunk like you in the back."

Shorty didn't turn. He eyed the Kid intently in the mirror. He could see that the Kid was plenty drunk, his face flushed, his body swaying. Yet, drunk or sober, the Kid wasn't so bad a shot that he could miss at this range. Over beyond and in back of the Kid, Shorty could see Joe Rivers. The bronc buster was already edging toward the Kid.

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Shorty figured if he could keep the Kid's attention focused on him, in a few seconds Rivers would be near enough to grab the Kid's arms.

"Sure, I'll turn around, Zero," Shorty said quietly. "But you ain't exactly hankerin' to become a murderer, are you?"

"Who the devil are you to object to a little thing like murder?" snarled the Kid.

Shorty's face looked tired. "O. K., Zero. Have it your own way. But I'll take just one more drink first, if you don't mind." He picked up the whiskey bottle before him on the bar and poured the drink. Then he suddenly slammed the bottle toward the wall at the far end of the room. There was a gasp of surprise, because nobody was there for Shorty to throw the bottle at. But in the mirror Shorty could see Zero's astonished gaze follow the bottle.

Joe Rivers saw the Kid's gaze swerve, and he leaped forward and flung his arms around the Kid's body and heaved.

Shorty whirled and dashed to the center of the room where Joe and the Kid were struggling, but not before the Kid had succeeded in blasting two wild slugs through the roof. Reaching down, Shorty wrenched the six-gun from the Kid's grip, and Joe Rivers backed away to let the two settle it between themselves.

The gun was just a gun; there wasn't anything about it to proclaim its ownership. Shorty scrutinized it swiftly, then looked at the glowering Kid.

"Where'd you git this smoke wagon?" Shorty demanded.

THE Kid stared at him, white with fury. "None of your business. I can git another where I got that one, too."

Shorty's sudden anger faded. He looked weary and a little pale, but his voice was patient. "You'll get no more guns, Zero. You'll go get your nag and come on home with me, that's what you'll do."

"Go to blazes!" the Kid flared. "I ain't goin' nowhere with you."

"If you need any help, just say the word, Shorty," Joe Rivers said quietly.

Shorty didn't take his eyes off the Kid. "Thanks, Joe. I can handle him." He said to the Kid: "Are you going to pull in your horns and come along, or do I have to make you?"

"You and who else?" the Kid demanded truculently.

Shorty sighed, transferred the gun to his left hand, and swung with the right. He brought one up from the floor that landed flush and stretched the Kid on his back. Joe Rivers backed a step, but nobody else moved. Turning, Shorty walked over to the bar and laid the six-gun down on the mahogany.

"I don't suppose you know who belongs to this shootin' iron, do you, Suddsy?" Shorty asked the bartender.

The man shook his head. "I reckon not, Shorty."

"O. K. When you find out, give it back to him. You might ask Jake O'Leary if he ever saw it before."

The barman nodded, but he didn't speak. Shorty went back to the senseless Kid, picked him up and threw him over his shoulder. Then without a word or a look for anyone else, he carried the Kid out to the hitching rack and tied him on his own horse. Leading the horse, he started down the street looking for the Kid's mount. He didn't do much looking until he got to the Silver Palace. And all he did then was to get on the Kid's horse and strike

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for home, still leading his own horse with the Kid tied in the saddle.

CHAPTER V

THE KID GETS WISE, TO HIMSELF

WHEN the Kid regained consciousness, he found himself looking at Shorty's back. They were almost home. The Kid wondered if there had been any run-in between Shorty and Jake when Shorty stopped by the Silver Palace to pick up the Kid's horse, but he didn't ask. He made a tremendous effort to repress the cold fury sweeping him and do a little thinking.

If he could have looked back into the Silver Palace, where Jake and Blacky were hunched over a table deep in lowered conversation, an empty whiskey bottle and a full one between them, the Kid would have known a little more about what the score was. For Blacky was saying:

"I guess you're right; it's the smart thing to stay put right here, but I'd 've sure wanted to see what happened over to the Antler if I was in your place."

"We'll find out sooner or later," O'Leary said dryly. "It's dead sure somethin' happened. The Kid didn't take his horse with him, but the nag's gone now. Don't you ever peep that the gun he had was mine. I've got another in my bedroll. I'll stick it in my empty holster and nobody'll ever know the difference. Whatever happened, that's small potatoes. We got other fish to fry, Blacky."

Blacky frowned, uneasy and dubious. "You sure Shorty won't never peep, Jake?"

Jake laughed. "Him? Shucks, no! He was one of the gang himself, wasn't he? If the sheriff ever got wise to that he'd grab Shorty, wouldn't he? Not on your life, Shorty won't peep. He's just playin' smart, Blacky: layin' low till he's dead sure it's safe to move. And there's just one good reason why he ain't ducked long before: he ain't hangin' round innocentlike, posin' as a common cowhand on the Deerhorn because he likes it, you know."

"And that reason is the Kid?" Blacky said shrewdly.

"Right, the Kid. Shorty couldn't have been on the Deerhorn more'n a year or so before the Kid showed up. He knows dang well the Kid has got him spotted, and he don't dare beat it till he's free of the Kid. He's playin' a slick game, playin' wet nurse to the Kid and pullin' the wool over everybody's eyes, and he's just smart enough to git away with it, if somebody don't stop his clock for him."

"You followed him to the Deerhorn?" Blacky put in.

"Nope." Jake took a drink from the bottle. "I got a slick scheme for livin' easy, but it keeps me movin'. It just happened that the Deerhorn was sort of in my line of march, as you might say, so I stopped off there. If Shorty and me hadn't got in a mix-up, I'd be there yet. But it don't hurt my scheme none. Only, I got to take care of Shorty and the Kid before I move on, see?"

"Sure, you got to, for your own safety," agreed Blacky. "I ain't that dumb. If you don't, you might run into Shorty anywhere again, and this time he might fool you and open his yap."

JAKE winked. "You said it. So, I got to egg the Kid on to blast Shorty, then the Kid'll get pulled for that, and I'm in the clear. If the Kid gets cold feet, I'll git him in a corner and tell him I seen Shorty there that day too, tell him I just happened to be in that neck of the

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woods and heard the shootin' and rode over to see what it was all about."

"Yeah, and you could say that you thought him and his folks was all dead, which is why you didn't stop; and you was plumb het up over such goin's on, so you tried to ketch up with the gang and they got away from you," suggested Blacky.

"Thunder, you *ain't* so dumb, Blacky. O. K., so that's the ticket if I have to pull it."

"And the Kid'll believe it all the more because Shorty was so hostile and give you such a pastin'," Blacky went on. "You could say that Shorty got a look at you that day when you was chasin' the gang."

"O. K. O. K.!" said O'Leary impatiently. "That's all worked out. Drop the subject. We got to do a little plannin'. I told you I got a scheme that's foolproof. I ought to know. I been workin' it ever since I ditched the gang, and ain't been caught yet. I'm willin' to take you in, and your pal, Skinny Tobin. But no more. That was another thing I learned from bein' in Shorty's gang. The fewer you got, the safer you are. So us three it is, and no more."

"That's all right by me," Blacky answered. "Spill the scheme."

"It's just this." Jake took another drink, set the bottle down, and leaned toward Blacky, brisk and businesslike. "I ride into a place where I ain't known. I git a job on a ranch bustin' broncs for a while, till I'm sort of knowed around as a hand on that spread. Then I look around and spot a good band of nags that'll bring money. I pick up a pal or two that can be trusted to take their split and beat it and keep their yaps shut. When I'm ready to roll, me'n' my pals pick up the nags some night when I'm supposed to be in town for a toot."

"Man, that *is* slick," said Blacky admiringly.

"I told you it was. And before anyone gits wise that either me or the horses is gone, I've got clean away, and sold the broncs for a good price, split with my pals and hit the trail by my lonesome. Just one good haul, and beat it. And I ain't got tripped up yet. But look, Blacky: the one important thing is, I always pull it where there's already been horse stealin' and cattle stealin' goin' on, which everybody knows can't have been done by me. And the lot I git away with is laid to the ones already doin' the dirty work in that neck of the woods. *And* I hear they been bothered on this range with a little horse stealin' for the last year."

Blacky grinned. "Which you found out afore you stopped at the Deerhorn, eh?"

"Feller, you ain't lyin'. So there it is, and all we got to do is lay low for a while and act awful innocent till a few more horses and cows is stole, and we got such perfect proof we ain't been near the range that we're above suspicion. Then we pick our skates and roll."

BUT the Kid couldn't hear that conversation, so he had no way of knowing what was being cooked up for him and Shorty Hahn. As a matter of fact, he wasn't thinking of Jake O'Leary, anyway. He was thinking only of Shorty, and of what a fool he'd been waiting to make Shorty talk, when he really knew so well in his heart that there could be no mistake, that Shorty Hahn was certainly the man he had seen bending over his father's body only a few minutes after his father had died. Jake had guessed accurately just how the Kid came to get the

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two brothers mixed, and believe it was Shorty who was the one to talk when he was whipped, instead of the brother his father had shot, but the Kid couldn't know that, either. From his father's stumbling dying speech it had seemed that he meant Shorty. The Kid couldn't know that the old man had been so near death that he hardly knew himself what he was saying.

All the Kid could know was what seemed to be, on the surface of things, and nothing had occurred as yet to hint that his reasoning was leading him astray from the truth. He could figure only from the appearance of things, and he was trying hard to do that now, but it suddenly occurred to him that he was too all-fired mad to think straight. And he sat up straight, slightly wide-eyed, staring at Shorty's back. For the first time it was driven home to the Kid that there was hard cold truth in what Shorty had tried to tell him a hundred times: his own lack of self-control was defeating him every time he tried to even the score.

For the first time the Zero Kid began to take stock of himself. And he felt slightly ashamed that he had been acting so much like a brainless kid instead of like a man. The Kid was not a fool; once he saw a thing clearly, it didn't have to be pounded into him a second time. Sitting there on Shorty's horse, staring at Shorty's back, the Zero Kid made the first big decision of his life. He was done flying off the handle and acting like a harebrained fool; he was done letting his bitter determination for revenge drive him into a wild fury that got him nowhere.

From now on, the Zero Kid was going to work on himself, until he could see where he was going and hold himself in, no matter how mad he got. The next time he traded punches with Shorty Hahn, it was going to be a different story. And he would start with the big gray stallion. Shorty Hahn had a surprise coming.

SHORTY did, there was no mistake about that. The rest of the Deerhorn crew made a dead set to punish the Kid for his attack on Shorty. They spoke to him only when they had to, and acted otherwise as if he wasn't on the ranch. Only Shorty treated him the same as ever. The Kid didn't care much. He was pursuing a real purpose, now, and he was one of those people who don't do things by halves. He set himself to work on the gray horse with such studied control that everybody felt a faint sense of surprise, watching from the side lines.

Naturally, he didn't top the gray stallion in ten minutes, and he didn't cinch the bit on his temper and bitterness in a day. But he made steady, dogged progress from then on. Every once in a while he heard comment among the men of the crew concerning the increasing depredations of the horse thieves infesting the hills, but he gave it little heed. But the Kid did top the gray stallion with record speed, at that, and he topped himself, too; and the day that he rode the spirited horse around the ranch buildings and across the fields and back, without the stallion making a move to fish for the sun or buck his rider to kingdom come, was a proud day for the Zero Kid.

He knew that Shorty had been watching the whole process lynx-eyed; he knew that the other hands had been watching too and had come more or less to forgive him for his past recklessness and render him some respect for what he had accomplished. They showed in their speech and their attitude just how

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they felt. What the Kid did not know was that Blacky and Jake O'Leary were keeping an eye on the proceedings, too, keeping warily to cover and avoiding detection.

Then it was that Jake decided it was time to move, and blow the whole business wide open.

CHAPTER VI

HORSE-THIEVES ROUNDUP

JAKE and Blacky had carefully chosen the band of good saddle horses that would bring them the biggest haul. They had got together with Skinny Tobin and made their plans for the theft and the getaway. Jake summed it tersely:

"We might as well kill three birds with one stone. We'll lay the trap to clean Shorty and the Kid too, and nobody'll ever dream we had a hand in it."

"How?" demanded Skinny Tobin. "Lay 'em all on the table, Jake, so we don't misfire and run into no snags."

O'Leary grinned evilly. "Well, I sure can do it without hurtin' my conscience none. I never turned a gun on no man. I've done my bit of owlhoot ridin' and lived easy, but I don't have no more use for a killer than any man what's honest at heart. And the smoothest slickest killer I ever seen was and is Shorty Hahn. Still, I don't want no part in really doin' the act of finishin' him. I once took my oath that I'd never kill no man, and I ain't breakin' it now. So we lay the ground so the Kid'll take care of Shorty and leave us in the clear."

"For gosh sake, don't talk so much," snapped Blacky. "You got a plan—out with it."

O'Leary nodded, unruffled by Blacky's impatience. "O. K., feller. Here it is. Next time the Deerhorn crew comes into town for a toot, which won't be long 'cause it's nigh pay day now, I get the Kid aside. I tell him I got positive proof that Shorty is up to his old tricks, layin' low on a convenient ranch, headin' a gang of horse thieves and takin' his split. I tell the Kid I don't care to get mixed up in it, and for him to keep still about me, I'm only puttin' him wise for his own good. See?"

"So far, so good," agreed Skinny Tobin. "Go on."

"O. K. Then I tell him I got private information that Shorty and his gang are plannin' to make one last good haul and blow—*and* they're goin' to git his gray stallion in the haul."

"Hey, hey!" Blacky cut in. "That'll make the Kid so mad—"

"Shut up!" snarled Jake. "I'm

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runnin' this show, and I know what I'm doin'. Close your trap and listen to what I'm tellin' you. This is foolproof! Of course the Kid'll be mad. We've got to make him so mad that we *know* he'll fall in with the scheme and we won't miss."

"But you ain't really goin' to take the gray, are you?" Skinny protested.

"Will you shut up and listen?" O'Leary grated. "Or do I cut you out of this?" Tobin subsided, and O'Leary went on swiftly. "Now, what I tell the Kid is this: Shorty will have his gang take the nags off and sell 'em, but he'll lay low there on the Deerhorn as innocent as pie, and wait for his split. The Kid will know when to move, when he wakes up some mornin' and the gray stallion is gone from his pasture. He won't say nothin' to Shorty, but he'll hit for the sheriff's office and tell the sheriff to come git Shorty."

BLACKY blinked. "Well, I'll be hanged! If that ain't nerve. Your side of it, I mean. If only the Kid ain't so mad he goes off his bean—"

O'Leary's eyes narrowed. "Listen! Ain't the Kid plumb proud of how he's licked his temper and learned to keep his head? And he's got brains enough to see that this is the prime time to do that very thing and settle the score for good and all. He'll do just what I tell him, don't worry! He'll hike for the sheriff, and swear that Shorty headed the gang that killed his old man, and that Shorty headed this gang that stole the horses from the Deerhorn, the gray included. And Shorty'll hang, and the Kid'll be all right. I ain't got nothin' against the Kid. I'd rather see it this way than see the Kid git hurt."

"You're overshootin' your mark," growled Skinny. "If you think the Kid won't go r'arin right after that gray nag, you're nuts."

"I ain't nuts, and the Kid won't chase the gray," snapped O'Leary. "I tell you this is foolproof. I'm goin' to tell the Kid the truth—Well, most of it anyway. I'm goin' to tell him I was with the gang that day, that I turned over a new leaf and ain't done no owlhootin' since, that I'll back him up and swear to the sheriff what I know about it. The sheriff is a pretty good old egg. He makes it his brag that he'd rather see a man go straight than put a noose around his neck. He won't do nothin' to me."

"That's risky," Blacky protested.

"Like blazes it is," retorted O'Leary. "What've I got to be afraid of? I never killed anyone, and nobody can prove I done any stealin' the last few years. I'll be in the clear. And you guys will go on with the herd, sell 'em off, lay low with the cash and wait for me."

"Oh, I see!" said Skinny. "That's different. But I'm still afraid the Kid'll come after the gray horse."

"Look," said O'Leary. "Even that part of it's foolproof. I tell the Kid to hit for the sheriff the day after he finds the nag gone. I tell him I'm goin' after the gang and bring his horse back. And I'm really bringin' the nag back, too. You guys git the gray, turn him over to me, and beat it with the other horses. I lay low for a while, till the Kid and the sheriff show up at the Deerhorn, then I ride in with the gray. I tell him and the sheriff you was too many for me, I barely managed to git the gray and git out with a whole hide. I tell him you went in the opposite direction to which you did go. Then after they've all cut off to track you down in the way you didn't go, I quietly light out to meet up with you, we split the coin, and keep goin'."

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Blacky drew a sigh of relief. "Yeah. Solid. Foolproof and water-tight. I got to admit it. What about us stickin' together after we make our gitaway, Jake? I reckon I'd like to tie up permanent with a gent that's got the brains you have."

"We'll see about that," answered O'Leary evasively. "Right now, the next move is to get the Kid primed, and snake the big gray out of his pasture. Keep mum and lay low. It won't be long now."

THE next night, when the Zero Kid headed home from town for the Deerhorn ranch that early fall. Jake O'Leary, he was thinking as he had never thought before. He felt a vast sense of relief that, thanks to Jake's shrewd brain, the whole wearying business was working out so smoothly, at last. The Kid wasn't hankering to become a murderer. If he and Jake hadn't both been so drunk that night they wouldn't have tried to pull such a fool stunt. But he, the Kid, was a little older, and much wiser, now; it was far better to handle it Jake's way, turn Shorty over to the sheriff red-handed, and clean the slate.

With Jake to add his testimony about being there that day and seeing Shorty with his gang, the sheriff would ask no further proof, no matter how much Shorty denied his guilt. And the sheriff wouldn't blame Jake for his past minor depredations, any more than the Kid himself did; a fellow always had a right to turn over a new leaf and be forgiven, so long as he wasn't a killer.

But, the Kid told himself, he'd go just a step further than that. He'd really catch Shorty red-handed, and have that much more to tell the sheriff. When he reached the ranch that night, he didn't go to bed in the bunkhouse. Nor did he care what the other cowhands of the crew might think. They'd mind their own business and let him alone, even though they might be curious about what he was up to.

So he went quietly out to the corral, saddled his little sorrel, and rode off to the pasture where he kept the gray stallion most of the time. There he hid the sorrel, and cached himself in the brush near the pasture gate, and began his vigil. He kept watch for three nights before anything happened.

Then, on the fourth night, shortly after the moon came up, he saw two men approach the gate, enter the pasture, rope the gray and come out with him. He suppressed a gasp of surprise. In the light of the moon he could get a good look at their faces; they were that Skinny Tobin and Blacky Shultz he had seen with Jake a time or two. So that was where Jake had got his information about Shorty's shady activities. As the men rode past the Kid's hiding place and started up the slope to the ridge beyond, he got to his feet. He'd just fork his nag and trail 'em till they met Shorty.

Then he heard a sound that brought him up rigid, unbelieving. He heard Shorty's voice behind him, saying lightly:

"Wait up for uncle, Kid. I've got Joe Rivers and Jess Doolittle here. We been getting curious about what you were doin' nights and we've kept a watch on you. How'd you get word that the horse thieves were workin' over this way, Kid?"

The Kid turned slowly, narrowed gaze focused on Shorty, and on Joe Rivers and Jess Doolittle.

THE Kid's temper burned through him like a searing fire, but he was holding himself in, and he was thinking fast and hard again. Something

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was phony, somewhere. Shorty Hahn wouldn't bring Joe Rivers and the foreman of the ranch with him if he was on a horse raid; not even Shorty would dare do that. He wouldn't last two minutes if Joe and Jess caught him in any crooked work. There was only one answer: Shorty didn't have anything to do with this theft of the gray stallion. Then who did? Had Skinny and Blacky lied when they told Jake that Shorty was in it? The Kid felt a little sense of bewilderment. Maybe Jake O'Leary wasn't the only one who had turned over a new leaf.

Only, did a man who was a killer have a right to be forgiven, no matter how straight he lived afterward? And did he, the Kid, have any right to answer that question? Wasn't there Somebody higher up who would take care of those sort of things, if you gave Him a chance to see that justice was done? All of which went through the Kid's mind with lightning speed as he stood there staring at Shorty Hahn. Then the Kid answered slowly:

"Jake O'Leary told me. They tried to ring him in on it, and he told 'em to go to hell, and slipped me the low-down on the quiet. There's somethin' fishy about this that I don't get. Let's follow 'em till they pick up the other horses."

"All right, Kid," Shorty said quietly. "This is your show. Sort of a game of follow the leader, I guess, and you're the leader. Get your nag."

By that time the two men leading the gray had got well up the slope, but they were still in sight, and it was an easy matter to keep them in sight. Pursued and pursuers continued on that grimly quiet ride for over two miles, before anyone else showed up on the scene. Then in a little dry swale, surrounded by thick forest cover, they came upon a third man waiting calmly in the small clearing.

The Kid held up a hand and muttered a low word of warning, but Shorty and Jess and Joe Rivers had already caught sight of the man waiting, and the four of them came to a halt and sat their saddles in silence, watching. They were not close enough to determine the identity of the third man, nor to hear the words of the three when Blacky and Skinny Tobin came up to the fellow waiting in the clearing. The three horse thieves remained there for a few seconds, talking; then Skinny turned the gray horse over to the third man, and Skinny and Blacky started to ride away.

The third man, who had taken over custody of the stallion, called after them a terse warning: "Make it snappy, you two! Get the skates and don't stop till you reach the hide-out. Then don't make another move till I show up."

"Keep your shirt on, Jake," Blacky said curtly. "We ain't goin' to make no slip. Be seein' you." They rode on.

For a long breath the Kid remained dumb in the astonished silence that held the four of them. Then he muttered in a harsh undertone: "Jess, you and Joe follow Blacky and Skinny Tobin. Shorty and me will haul Jake O'Leary into camp. Come on, Shorty."

DOOLITTLE and Rivers turned away without a word, riding along the rim of the tree belt to keep Skinny and Blacky in sight.

"It's still your show, Kid," Shorty said gravely. "I don't understand everything I know about it, but I'm still following the leader."

"I don't understand it all, either," the Kid told him. "It's phonier

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than I thought. Don't talk. Just come on. I got to think." But the thinking wasn't easy, as he rode on in the wake of Jake O'Leary and the gray stallion. This was the biggest and hardest decision of the Kid's life: could a killer be forgiven? Did a killer ever deserve to be forgiven?

The Kid knew now, beyond all doubt, that Shorty didn't have anything to do with this particular piece of dirty work. And Jake was damned. Whatever Jake's part in the shady business, Jake had lied to the Kid. And that was one thing Shorty had never done. Ever since he had been on the Deerhorn ranch, the Kid had to admit that in all his dealings Shorty had been square as a die. The Kid hadn't tried to beat Shorty down again, since he'd begun work on his own transformation; with cooler thought had come the sanity of caution. He wasn't sure even yet that he could prove himself a better man than Shorty in a fist fight. And what was the use, anyhow, of making Shorty confess? The Kid already knew that it was Shorty he had seen bending over his dad's body.

Which brought it all back to the terrible decision that was hanging over the Kid. Could any man forgive a killer? And here he was trying to figure it out again, after he'd just decided to leave it to that Somebody higher up who would settle things if you gave Him a chance.

The Kid said suddenly: "I don't know what we're lettin' him go any farther for, Shorty. Let's close in and call a showdown."

Shorty didn't answer. He didn't need to. The Kid knew the answer. It was still the Kid's show, and Shorty was still playing follow the leader. The Kid nudged his sorrel to a faster pace, swung out in an arc, and headed in a direction to cut off Jake O'Leary, who was taking a leisurely gait toward the deeper hills with the gray stallion. Shorty followed silently at the sorrel's flank.

They came out abruptly into another small clearing that the Kid had aimed for, within a few yards of the unsuspecting Jake. The Kid barked a low command:

"Pull up and reach, Jake. We've got you covered."

CHAPTER VII

JUSTICE FOR A KILLER

FOR an instant, Jake seemed to freeze in the saddle. Then he pulled his mount to a halt, and turned his head to see the Kid and Shorty there cutting off his retreat, and his startled gaze caught the glint of moonlight on the barrel of the Kid's leveled gun.

Jake stared for an instant with narrowed, dismayed eyes. He had no way of knowing that the Kid had been watching the pasture, or that the Kid had filched an extra gun from the saddle room to carry on those nights of vigil. He only knew that something had slipped, bad, somewhere, and he was going to need all the wits he had to get out of the tight spot he had unexpectedly run into.

"Take it easy, Kid," Jake said hastily. "I got your horse away from the—"

"Save it!" the Kid cut in. "We followed Skinny and Blacky all the way from the pasture gate. We heard what you said to 'em back there in the swale. Reach high and quick, or I'll let you have it. I guess you better unbuckle your gun belts and drop 'em first. And don't make a move to draw, or I'll plug you."

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Jake O'Leary was shrewd. He knew that the least fool move would cost him his life. He had to play it smooth. But he could get out of it. He'd been in tighter holes, and he'd found the opening. He'd get out of this, and leave both the Kid and Shorty Hahn as meat for the buzzards. Slowly and carefully he moved his hands to his belt buckles, and began to unfasten the buckles, thinking fast. He had to throw the guns where he could lay hold of one of them when he wanted it. He removed both belts and tossed them one by one to the ground off to the right between him and the Kid.

He tossed them accurately to a spot where a small shrub stood up like a rock from a bare patch of ground. When he tossed the second belt, he gave it an imperceptible but skillful flip that threw the gun clear of the open-topped holster. And he watched where the gun fell; it didn't matter about the belt. That was another little trick that had stood him in good stead before. Then he raised his hands shoulder high, and looked at the Kid.

"All right," he said curtly. "Where do we go from here?"

"Get off that horse and come over here while I tie you up," ordered the Kid. "Looks like it's you that's goin' to be turned over to the sheriff, Jake." The Kid added over his shoulder: "Keep him covered, Shorty." And he shoved his six-gun back into the leather, slid from his little sorrel and started toward Jake.

JAKE swung to the ground, walked toward the Kid till he was opposite the shrub behind which the freed gun had fallen, then he stopped, still with his hands raised. Probably the easiest way out, was to keep quiet till the Kid started to tie him, then grab, and hold the Kid between him and Shorty until he could lay hand on the gun. There wasn't anything to get worried about. He was going to come out of this fast and easy. He waited till the Kid came up and stopped behind him. He turned his head slightly till he could see the Kid out of the corner of his eye, and put his hands behind him. When he saw that the Kid was reaching for his wrists, he whirled and grabbed, so swiftly, so lithely, that the Kid was between him and Shorty before Shorty could guess his maneuver and pull trigger.

But the Kid was too quick. The Kid's face showed pasty white even in the moonlight, and he had never known such blasting fury in his life as that which burned through him now. But his head was clear and his hands were steady. As coolly as if there were no temper in him, he swayed back, eluding Jake's attempted bear hug. He dropped his right shoulder, doubled his fist, and came in with a rush.

The blow caught O'Leary high on the side of the head with plenty of steam. O'Leary gasped and staggered back, but before the Kid could follow it up, he drove in with a savage counter blow. The Kid instinctively rolled with the punch, but O'Leary had several pounds' weight advantage, and the Kid went down from the sheer force of the blow. O'Leary let out a roar of triumph and leaped to come down with both feet on the Kid's ribs. He knew well enough that Shorty wasn't going to risk a shot in the dim light till he could be sure of not hitting the Kid. He was right in that. Shorty held his fire.

But the Kid rolled with the easy evasion of a cat and was on his feet in a flash. He barely gained an upright position when O'Leary rushed

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again. And O'Leary wasn't fighting as wildly as he might seem; he was working with every move toward the spot where the freed gun had fallen. The Kid ducked a whistling haymaker and neatly parried a hard left jab.

Then suddenly he took the offensive away from O'Leary. But he did not duck his head and rush in blind mad, the thing O'Leary had been hoping and waiting for. He flicked out with a long left that took a patch of hide off O'Leary's nose. Involuntarily, Jake lifted his guard, and the Kid drove in with a short hard right that landed in the pit of O'Leary's belly, and brought a grunt of pain from the bigger man's lips.

That was when O'Leary began to feel the swift stab of warning alarm. The Kid wasn't going to lose his head and go to pieces. He had done that job of self-discipline too well; he was probably as mad as he had ever been in his life, but he was cool as ice. With a wave of dismay, O'Leary suddenly reached out with open arms, took a quick hook around the Kid's neck, hugged him close, and drove a desperate knee into the Kid's groin, all with one fast motion.

But again the Kid, almost superhuman in that cold fury, was too fast for him. The Kid twisted his body with the ease of an eel and took the treacherous blow on his hip bone, ducked his head into O'Leary's chest, brought his head up under O'Leary's chin with a sharp crack, and broke Jake's hug.

THEN the Kid waded in, even yet not charging blindly, but with his head high and both eyes open, hitting like an automaton. He lashed out with furious rights and lefts, backed by the full strength of his tough young body, with the steam of his cold-cased fury behind every blow. He drove O'Leary back steadily and relentlessly. O'Leary brought up both arms to protect his face from the Kid's hard punishing fists.

The Kid measured him coolly, and drove a savage right into the pit of Jake's solar plexus with all the steam he had. Jake gasped and doubled up, and the Kid drove another savage blow into his pain-twisted face. O'Leary went down.

But despite the worst of the punishment the Kid was meting out, O'Leary still kept his head enough to maneuver toward the fallen wait-

ing gun. And when he went down, the gun was almost within his reach. But he knew several things now. He knew that he could not whip the Kid, and he knew that he had to stop the fight, or he wouldn't have enough strength left to make a getaway even after he had blasted down both the Kid and Shorty Hahn. He shivered with the paralyzing fear that washed through him.

There was just one thing he had

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to do. He had to stop the demoralizing drive of those battering fists and reach the gun. And to do that he had to rivet the attention of both Shorty and the Kid so completely that they wouldn't realize what he was doing. He made no attempt to get to his feet. He lay there half doubled up, and his groan of pain was not faked. Neither was the half gasp with which he caught his breath as he opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could say a word, Shorty Hahn's voice rose from beyond and behind the Kid, flat and clear:

"I don't know what sort of slick lies he told them two rannies that swiped the gray, Kid, but *he's* the rat that killed your dad and your kid brother. Make him come clean, and lace into him with both fists if he don't talk."

O'Leary shrank back against the ground—and slid another inch toward the gun. He could see it now from the tail of his eye, lying there by the little round shrub, gleaming dully in the moonlight. It occurred to him suddenly that the best way to stop the pound of the Kid's fists and keep his and Shorty's attention riveted, was to spit out the truth, the truth that would shock the Kid into temporary paralysis of all movement while the Kid was still squarely between Jake and Shorty. It didn't matter what the Kid knew, anyhow. Within a few seconds both the Kid and Shorty Hahn would be feed for the buzzards.

The Kid leaned toward Jake, both fists ready, and his voice was as brittle as ice. "Come on, Jake, there's too much about this I don't understand. Spill it."

Jake was still gasping from that solar-plexus blow, but he was beginning to get his wind back. He said between gasps: "O. K. I'll talk. But keep your hands off me. Yeah, I'm the guy that killed 'em, both of 'em." He moved another inch toward the gun. "But don't forget that Shorty was roddin' the gang."

"That's a lie," rapped Shorty. "Bore into him, Kid. *He's afraid of the fists that can hammer him.* Ask him who I am, ask him what I was doin' there that day."

Jake swallowed, and pulled himself still another inch toward the gun. One more move, and he could grab it. He said sourly: "He's my brother. And I ain't proud of the fact."

BEWILDERMENT flared in the Kid's eyes. "You're Shorty's *brother!* But my dad killed Shorty's brother!"

"No," Shorty said. "He shot him, Kid. He thought he'd killed him. I thought he was dead myself when I found him. I knowed he was a skunk, but he was my brother, my half brother. So I picked him up and wet-nursed him for two months till he was on his feet. And how did he thank me for it? He cracked my head with a gun barrel, from behind, and left *me* for dead. That's how I got that scar, Kid. Go on, ask him what I was doin' there that day."

Revulsion shook the Kid, at the sudden revelation, and for one wild instant he was sick at thought of how nearly he had killed the wrong man. He swayed toward O'Leary, both fists threatening. "Well!"

Jake was breathing easy now, and he felt a sweep of wild triumph. He was going to make it. Nothing mattered now. He was going to make it and win free. Both Shorty and the Kid were so intent on hearing what he had to say, he could jump up and yell before they'd come out of it enough to make a move.

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He laughed, in the exultation of his certain triumph. He answered with mocking insolence:

"You might as well know the whole business. Shorty always made me sick, struttin' around with that holier-than-thou air of his, tryin' to reform his poor wicked brother. Even after I split his fool head for him, he was still tryin' it. He got wind that I was takin' my gang to git even with your old man for puttin' a bullet through me, an' he come racin' to try to stop it. He was too late. If he hadn't been such a softy, and stopped to find out if any of you was alive and there was anything he could do for you, he might have caught up with the gang. But we got the lead on him then, and I got clean away."

O'Leary snatched up the gun, and swung it into position from where he lay, roaring in his final surge of triumph: "Just as I'm gettin' away now, blast you!"

The Kid had no time to move. Shorty had no chance to fire without hitting the Kid. O'Leary thrust the gun upward and pulled the trigger, point-blank at the Kid's chest, not five feet away.

For as long as he lived, the Kid remembered that he had told himself he was leaving it to that Somebody higher up to settle the score. The gun had fallen hard, plowed into the loose gravelly earth with momentum enough to plug the barrel with earth and stone, a little ragged-edged stone that was set into the bore as if it had been welded there.

The gun blew up in O'Leary's hand. The top of the hammer hurtled backward, drove through his right eye and embedded itself in his treacherous brain. Before the Kid's dazed gaze, and Shorty's widened stare, O'Leary let out one last choked gasp, kicked out with his right foot, and fell back, dead.

For a long minute, the Kid stood still, then he shut his eyes, and turned his head. Then, turning clear around, he opened his eyes and looked at Shorty. Shorty had slid to the ground, and stood there facing him, and behind Shorty were two moon-outlined figures on horseback, Joe Rivers and Jess Doolittle.

"Go ahead, Kid," Doolittle said quietly. "Git it off your chest. Don't mind us. The other two showed fight an' we had to drill 'em. Then we followed you'n' Shorty. We come up just in time to hear Jake sing his little song. Lay it on the line, Kid. We're with you."

The Zero Kid stared into Shorty's face and tried to speak, but there was a lump in his throat, and the words wouldn't come.

"O. K., Kid," Shorty said softly. "You've said it. Your face says it, even in the moonlight. But it had to end like this, Kid. You'd never have believed me if I'd told you the truth. I never knew you was alive till you showed up on the Deerhorn, and I've knowed all along what you thought. But I had to wait. Don't you think, maybe, that you an' me has lone-wolfed it long enough, Kid? A team always pulls better than a lone nag."

But the Kid couldn't get his jaws unlocked. He did the only thing he could do right then. He lifted a hand, and rubbed away the blur in his eyes, and held the other hand out to Shorty.

"*Bueno*, partner," Shorty said. "Now round up the gray and let's hit for home. I reckon you'n' me are goin' to sleep easy tonight for the first time in six years."

THE END.

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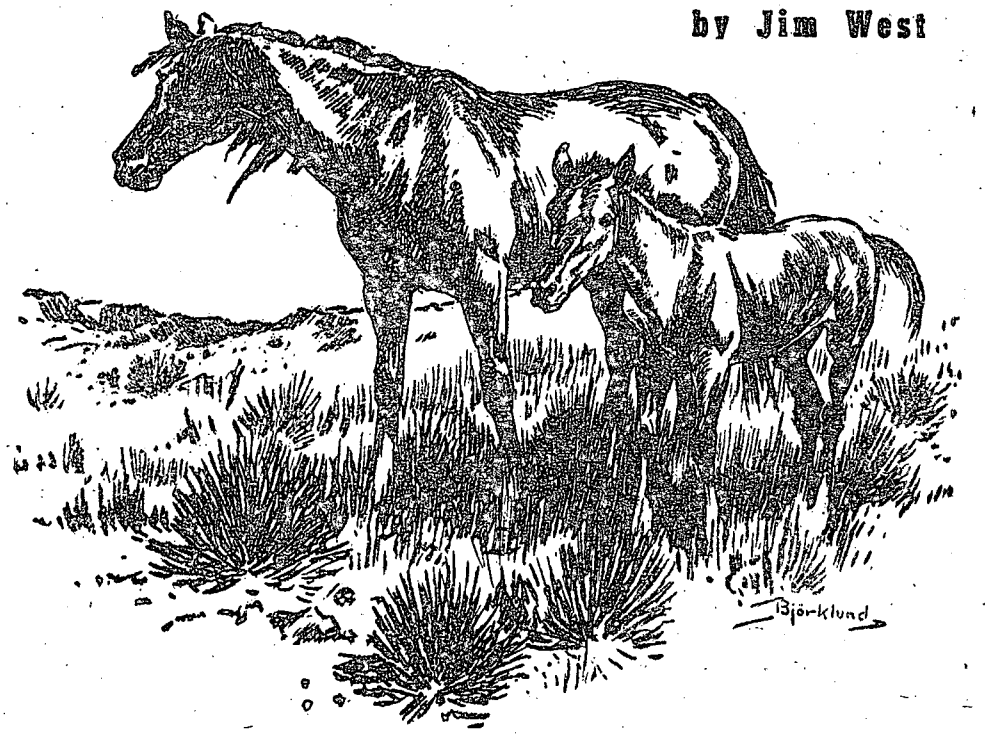
THE SPANISH HORSE

by Jim West



SPAIN has nowhere left its imprint in the New World and in the southwestern part of our own country more strongly than in its horseflesh. More than likely wherever a trim cow pony is seen on a Western range the animal has Spanish blood in its veins. Some branch of its family tree is almost sure to date back to the Spanish horse.

Four hundred years ago the early Spanish explorers and settlers introduced horses to the Southwest, animals they brought with them from Spain. At the time the Spanish horse was tops in Europe. Largely of Arab stock, it had the Arabian's trim lines, its swiftness and its hardy dependability.

It is glamorous to picture those first horses from which the West's roving bands of wild mustangs afterward originated as proud, pure-blooded Spanish stallions and mares. But that unfortunately is merely happy fiction. It makes good reading, but it is not in line with the facts.

Aside from the common-sense observation that it is unlikely Spain would send only its best horses with a group of adventurers headed for nobody knew what in a strange land that lay beyond the limits of the Old World, Cortes had a special historian with him on his venture into Mexico. This careful scribe, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, set down for posterity both the number of horses in the outfit (sixteen) and their principal characteristics.

There was listed, for instance, a

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dark stallion called Muleteer, and the following notation: "One of the *good* horses we brought in the fleet." The italics are ours. Further down the line was a "light chestnut stallion, no good." Two of the sixteen were rated "excellent." Others were rated "fair." Apparently from the record that first remuda was just an average bunch.

Later when the conquest of Mexico began in earnest almost a thousand horses of perhaps about the same caliber were brought over from Spain. Some of these were mentioned as wandering away from the often careless supervision of the Spanish camps. De Soto, too, in 1539 took a hundred head of Spanish horses to Florida. Using them on his inland journey to the Mississippi River, he got them that far and then after he had crossed the river with them, a number of them broke away.

THESE different groups of runaway Spanish horses were the foundation of the mustang bands. The horses took to the new country and their new freedom like nobody's business. Less than fifty years after De Soto discovered the Mississippi and lost part of his horse cavvy, the Indians who learned quickly had overcome their superstitious fear of the animals and were using them for hunting, for fighting and often as an emergency food supply.

The horse and the Indian made a perfect team in the grassy plains country west of the Mississippi River. A farther scattering of Spanish horses throughout the Southwest was brought about by the missions that were early established there. The missions as a rule had their own livestock. Most of them maintained their own bands of horses. At times some of these animals broke away and joined their wild brethren. Sometimes the bands were stolen by the Indians and sometimes horses were given to the Indians as gifts.

At any rate the Indian appreciated and prized highly this new means of locomotion. It increased his scope of travel, improved his warfare and in general made life a lot easier. The horse was not only practical. It was an exhilarating addition to the Indian's previous existence.

Thus in an incredibly short period of history the Spanish horse became part and parcel of the West, as closely linked with the native Indians as their war paint and feathers. As far as the horse itself was concerned generations of return to the wild or semiwild state and the inexorable law of the survival of the fittest, while it tended to reduce the average size of the animal, did make of the mustang a sturdy, shrewd and self-reliant little creature.

It is hardly fair to speak of the mustang, as some do, with slightly turned-up noses. His ancient Spanish ancestry may not always have been the best. But he is, or was, a strictly Western, American product. He tackled a new land alone and unafraid of the future. He broke away from his old masters. Without pampering or petting he became as spirited and hardy a horse as the country has ever seen. He asked favors of no one and he certainly didn't give any.

The term "mustang" has come to be loosely used in the West. Almost any range horse that is on the wild side is apt to be called a mustang by a hard-pressed hoss wrangler. Small Western ponies of domestic extraction which show much evident Spanish breeding are likewise erroneously labeled mustangs. Originally the word was applied only

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to *wild* descendants of the early Spanish horses in America.

WHEN these horses cut loose and struck out for themselves they were the first of their kind in western America. That is, they were the first modern horses. In reality, after an absence of æons, the horse in a vastly improved form was merely returning to what geologists claim was the original habitat of the species. The geologists have fossils and bones of these first horses found in rocks millions of years old to prove it.

Perhaps fifty million years ago when the West was still forming and the towering Rocky Mountains were as young as a newborn babe, the first horse of all horses scurried around and kicked up his heels along their eastern slopes. He was a tiny little frisky Bill, about as big as a cocker spaniel is today. He had a long, ratty tail, four toes on each of his front feet, and three toes on the back ones. The toes were padded, like a dog's, and also like a dog's, equipped with nails.

Outside of that in his general contour, the shape of his head, his round-bellied body and trim, slender, tapering legs he looked pretty much like a miniature edition of the creature he eventually became—a modern horse. Scientists called him Eohippus. He survived in those prehistoric times ages and ages before the arrival of man on earth largely because he could move about daintily and quietly on his padded feet under the lush, weird vegetation that cloaked the warm, semi-tropical forests with which the North American continent was then studded. In addition when he was frightened, or surprised by an enemy he could run like blazes and his fast little legs took him out of danger. There were plenty of dangers. Eohippus got himself lots of running exercise. He became one of the fastest things on four legs in the early world, and one of the smartest.

And he certainly got around. Scientists say branches of the family wandered up into what is now Alaska, and from there crossed over to Asia. In those far-distant days of an entirely different geological era Asia and North America joined at their tips. There was a land passage from one continent to the other. Eohippus didn't have to swim the Bering Straits. They weren't there.

Time passed, and when a geologist says that he means a little thing of anywhere from *twenty to thirty million years*. Even so the descendants of the original horse hung on.

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They were growing bigger and faster all the time. For a long while they had just three toes and were about the size of a modern woollie. Certain varieties lived and died out in different parts of the world. Finally Equus arrived; a little small still and considerably on the chunky side but recognizably a horse, and the direct ancestor of all our horses.

Equus thrived in North America until the so-called Ice Age when something big happened to the earth's former climate and great mile-high caps of ice crept down from the north pole as far south in this country as New Jersey and Missouri. Equus, as well as a lot of other animals such as the elephants and tigers that lived in this country at the time couldn't take it. Some of the Equus horses had the foresight to depart via the land passage route to Asia, Europe and Africa before the first ice cap actually started southward and so got away. In time those that remained in North America died out.

WHEN man came along he obtained his first horses from Asia and Africa. They were blood-line descendants of the North American Equus, which, in turn, was a descendant of little Eohippus, the beginning of all horses. Getting down to what is practically the present, Spain got her horses mainly from Africa, and they were darn good ones. And Spain it was that returned them after ages of absence to the land that had been their home in the first place.

No wonder they kicked up their heels and headed for the brush and mesquite thickets at every chance they got to form their own free bands once more. Even today in Texas along the southern Gulf coast and the Rio Grande border country there are found smallish cow ponies, smart and spirited that are predominately of early Spanish breeding. These creatures, often spoken of as Spanish horses, are probably the closest to being actual lineal descendants of the first horses brought to this country by the Spaniards.

The rancher who works his cattle with a string of these animals or the cowboy who owns a "Spanish hoss" usually has nothing but praise for them. As a rule they weigh well under a thousand pounds. Not much over eight hundred and fifty pounds in most cases. They seldom stand much over fourteen hands high. But they are all horse, hard as nails and pretty as a painted wagon.

There is no special color predominance in these "Spanish horses." Most of them run to browns, bays and sorrels. Now and then a buckskin or a dun shows up. More rarely a cream color is found. In general structure the animals are clean-limbed, short-backed and well-formed.

Another strain of Spanish horses also found its way into the West from California. But these horses, imported directly from Spain for the most part and raised by the big *rancheros* in Caliofrnia when it was a part of Mexico, are really a different story. They were in the main fine animals eagerly sought after by early traders and American travelers to the coast. But they were brought to the New World years after Hernando Cortes landed in 1519 in Mexico with his sixteen Spanish horses and scared the daylights out of the natives with his "cavalry" because they first thought man and beast were just separate parts of a single strange and fearful creature.

THE END

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SMOKY SHOWDOWN

by S. Omar Barker

"WOOHAW!" squalls Shirt-tail Simmons, purt' near jumping out of his pants. "Look out fer that snake!"

Being a couple of steer nurses fresh off the pay roll, Shirt-tail and me have drifted into Dos Plazas to comb out our cockleburs and see what makes. If we likee, maybe we'll winter here. We're ambling down an alley from Hoffstetter's Hoss Hotel

Dos Plazas had a real, honest-to-goodness fire, but the two hose companies were too busy untangling themselves to do anything about it.

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where we've stabled our steeds, when Shirt-tail throws this snake fit.

"That ain't no snake," I says, hauling him down from a telegraph pole by his shirt tail, which is out, as usual. "It's a . . . it's a . . . well, it dang sure ain't no snake!"

"Watch out, Whistle Pants!" tremulates Shirt-tail, still as spooky as a coyote caught in a hen house. "It's a-movin'!"

Sure enough it was. Both up and down the alley, this roundish thing the color of a sun-bleached pack rat and as big around as a horse thief's neck—after stretchin'—comes suddenly to life. It squirms a little here, unbends a kink there, crawls on a couple of yards, then stops again, all accompanied by an inner noise I would describe as squitzy.

"It *is* a snake, Whistle Pants!" Shirt-tail starts for his telegraph pole again.

"Don't be more of a fool than your breedin' requires, Shirt-tail," I says severely. "Did you ever see a snake, sixty yards long, without no head?"

"Not till now I never! How you know it ain't got its head stuck in a gopher hole somewheres around that corner?"

"One way to find out," I says, gittin' out my ol' Barlow, "is to stick a knife into it. If it's anything alive, it'll squirm."

Ol' Shirt-tail is the kind of a feller which if the man in the moon was to spit, he'd be in the way of it, and the squirt when my knife blade struck water, hit him smack in the eye. I sure thought he'd gone to the wild bunch and I'd never ketch him. But around the corner he run into a big crowd blockin' the street and a couple of hombres grabbed him.

"Great goose feathers!" one of 'em asks Shirt-tail as I come up, "where'd you ever learn to run like that?"

"Didn't have to learn," I says. "A snake spit in his eye back there in the alley, an' here he come!"

But they're too interested in Shirt-tail to pay me any mind.

"Did you see him breeze around that corner on one wheel, Dunk?" the whiskery jasper inquires of the big un. He turns to Shirt-tail again. "My good Christian friend, you're the man I been lookin' for!"

"What for?" Shirt-tail tries to pull away from 'em. "I ain't robbed no bank! I'm jest an ol' cowpoke—"

"That can *run!*" The feller with the U. S. Grant whiskers leans over to feel Shirt-tail's leg muscles and my pardner misjudges his motives.

"Don't git familiar!" Shirt-tail snorts. "I ain't no horse!"

Maybe he ain't, but bein' strangers in town, I don't see no point in gittin' throwed in jail over it.

"Easy, pardner!" I says, grabbin' him before his windmilling fists collide with somebody's nose.

BUT I needn't to have bothered, because just then everybody's attention is taken over by a little man announcing from a high plank platform out in the street that the great nozzle-pointing contest between Hose Cart Co. No. 1 of Upper Town and the Git-there-first Hose Cart Co. of Lower Town, is about to commence.

A big rag resembling a Navaho squaw's petticoat starts up the flagpole, somebody sticks a match to it, it scoots blazin' to the top and two bunches of fellers in coffeepot hats start pointin' round brass thingumbobs at it. Then the hombre on the paltform hollers "Go!" and I be danged if streams of water don't shoot out, just like it did out of Shirt-tail's "snake" back there in the alley when I stuck my knife into it. One of the jets sure shoots high,

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and as quick as them hombres aholt of the nozzle git the range, it douses that blazin' petticoat like Pecos Bill spittin' out a forest fire. But the best the fellers on the other side can do is squirt a little old dribble about ten feet high.

Part of the crowd begins to whoop and holler, but the rest kind o' groan and let in to cuss.

One of them guys in a brass sombrero pushes through the crowd and runs up the alley.

"Now I know what your 'snake' was," I whisper to Shirt-tail. "It's what they call a fire hose."

"Well, if that don't beat aces!" says Shirt-tail. "How many men you reckon it takes to pour water in at the other end?"

"Never mind," I says. "Let's git out o' here!"

But when something new ketches Shirt-tail's interest you just as well try to budge a bull with a button-hook, and just then this brass hat comes tearin' back out of the alley.

"Hold on, folks!" he yells, shakin' his fist toward the bunch wearin' red coffeepots. "Somebody's knifed our hose back there in the alley! That's how come we didn't have no pressure! Show us the skunk that done it an' we'll string him up too high for the buzzards!"

"Well, I be danged, Whistle Pants!" exclaims Shirt-tail. "All you done was stick your knife in it!"

"Shut up!" I growls, snapping a bear-trap grip on his arm. "You learn to hold your tongue, or I'll split it back so far you'll spit forked! Let's git out o' here!"

But it looks like I'm too late.

"Just a minute, my good Christian friends," says this feller with the Civil War whiskers, squarin' off in front of us. "You goin' some place?"

"You guessed it, general!"

I start to edge past him—and find myself eye to eye with a shiny law star on the half-acre boozem of the lunk called Dunk. He don't say nothing, but he's got on a mighty big pistol.

"Let me see," says Grant's Whiskers, giving us the cold and fishy. "You two came out of that alley in a mighty big hurry, didn't you?"

"Shore did," blurts Shirt-tail. "When Whistle Pants stuck his knife into that whatchumacallit, it squirted right in my eye! We thought it was a snake!"

"Stuck a knife in it, eh?" says Grant's Whiskers, soft as velvet. "My good Christian friend, do you realize what the members of Hose Cart Co. No. 1 and their partisans will do to you if they find out you're the rat that gnawed their hose?"

"I ain't your good Christian friend," I tell him with a shrug, "but I realize."

"Then, my good Christian friend," purs Whiskers, "maybe you and your pardner better come with us."

"All right," I says. "But just call me your good Christian friend one more time an' I'll bust you in the snoot! Where you takin' us?"

"You'll find out, my good Christian friend," says Whiskers. "Follow me."

"I thought you was goin' to sock him!" whispers Shirt-tail as we line out up the street.

"Never mind," I growls. "I never sock a man in the snoot when his back's turned!"

Not with a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound, badge-wearin' gorilla like this Dunk practically breathing down my neck, I don't.

IT all turns out as nice as sugar on sirup, though. First Grant's Whiskers buys us a drink, then he conducts us to the office of the Dos

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Plazas *Planet*, a shacky plank building on Railroad Avenue in Lower Town, and introduces us to the same bleary-eyed, little blink we'd seen on the platform ballyhooin' the water-squirtin' contest.

"Booze," he says, "these gents are new prospects for Lower Town's hose-cart team. I want you to give 'em a good write up in the *Planet*, but not a word about them cutting Upper Town's fire hose—unless I tell you to. They're strangers in our midst, and I'd hate to have them lynched till they're better acquainted. Is that clear?"

"Puffickly, Mr. Shumwalt . . . ah-hmm," says Editor Booze Binkley betraying a chronic case of whiskey tonsilitis. "Will you . . . ah-hmm . . . gentlemen please write down your names for me so I shall not . . . ah-hmm . . . forget them?"

He shoves a sheet of blank paper at me and another one at Shirt-tail. Being handier with a piggin' string than a pen, I can write a heap better where there's a straight line to kind o' guide me, and the only place there is any line on this paper in way down toward the bottom, so that's where I sign. And Shirt-tail does the same on his.

"Thank you, Mr. . . . ah-hmm . . . Herbert L. Anderson"—Editor Binkley bows toward me—"and thank you . . . ah-hmm . . . Mr. Howard A. Simmons." He bows toward Shirt-tail, more manners than a horse thief at a hangin'. "I shall . . . ah-hmm . . . give you both a nice write up. I would . . . ah-hmm . . . proffer you a libation, but unfortunately, alas—"

"Out of likker again, eh?" Grant's Whiskers Shumwalt sounds just a leetle out of patience, but he drags a bottle from his pocket and hands it over. "Well, try and keep sober enough to get out the paper, you savvy?"

"Puffickly," says Editor Binkley, hastily shovin' the bottle inside his printer's apron without passin' it.

"Come along, boys." Whiskers gives us the nod. "Dunk and I will escort you to your hotel."

"Good of you," I says, "but we ain't picked one out yet."

But that don't make no never mind to him. The Hannigan House is run by a friend of his and it's upstairs over the Lower Town Fire Department where Dunk, the Lower Town marshal also hangs out, so we got plenty protection in case them Upper Town hose-cart cowboys happen to find out who cut their hose and decide to lynch us. So that's where we find ourselves, with a couple of cots and a cracked china wash bowl for furniture.

"Sure is nice of Mr. Shumwalt to take care of us thisaway, ain't it?" says Shirt-tail. "You reckon that was sure 'nough Horse-thief Charley?"

"It was Charley Maxwell, all right," I says. "Only I never did take much stock in him being a horse thief."

WHAT we refer to is a little coincident on the way to the hotel, when we overtook a tall young feller in a flat-crowned Stetson and sober-lookin' store clothes strolling along with a curly-headed young lady that you somehow knowed was purty even before you got a front view. I noticed something kind o' familiar about the set of this hombre's framework, but it was Shirt-tail that clapped him on the shoulder.

"Hi yah, Horse-thief! Ain't you kind o' off your range?"

The way this young feller whirls around you'd think somebody had

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jabbed him with a pitchfork.

"Sorry, stranger," he says, kind o' stiff. "You must have the wrong bull by the tail."

"Well, you didn't have no mustache when we knowed you up in Montana," says Shirt-tail. "In fact, I reckon you wasn't even old enough to sprout one. Nor no suit of go-Easter duds, nor no Four X sombrero—say, horse stealin' must've turned out profitable!"

I ain't sure whether Charley tried to give me a wink to shut Shirt-tail up or not, but there's a look of distress on this damsel's pretty face that does just as good.

"Never mind the jokin', Shirt-tail," I says. "Cain't you see there's a lady present?"

"An' purty, too!" Shirt-tail is sure a hard bottle to cork. "I bet if she knowed—"

"Gentlemen," busts in Horse-thief Charley plumb soberly, "let's have no misunderstanding. Whatever evidence of prosperity you see, I owe to a deceased uncle. And for *your* information, Shumwalt, there's just about enough of it left to revive my newspaper again!"

"What happened?" Shirt-tail inquires. "Did somebody tear it?"

"The Clay County *Clarion*," explains Charley, "burned to the ground the night before it printed its first issue, printing presses and all."

"You don't tell me!" I says. "Couldn't them two fancy fire-fightin' companies put it out?"

"Unfortunately," says Shumwalt, "the boys of both hose-cart companies were at a barbecue at the time."

"Yeah." Charley shrugs. "As the guests of Mr. Shumwalt—four miles out of town! But I just want to tell you, Shumwalt, my new press is ordered. There'll be an honest newspaper published in this man's town yet!"

"Fine!" says Shumwalt, smiling. "Editor Binkley needs a competitor to keep him on his toes!"

It occurs to me what Editor Binkley needs worse is something to keep him off his bottle, but I don't mention it, and without no motion to adjourn, the meeting busts up.

"Maxwell seems to be a right enterprising young man," observes Shumwalt, kind o' pawing his whiskers. "You say he was mixed up in some horse stealing up in Montana?"

"We didn't say no such!" I says. "Besides, not every colt that runs with the wild bunch turns out to be a mustang. How long's he been here?"

"Not very long," answers Shumwalt. "But long enough that he's got notions."

"I don't blame him," sighs Shirt-tail. "I could get notions about that little dew drop my own self!"

"I don't mean about the girl, though I admit she's right classy for a preacher's daughter. I mean he's got the crazy notion that Dos Plazas ought to be run as one town instead of two. What we older citizens look up as pleasant, friendly rivalry between Upper Town and Lower Town, Maxwell considers an obstacle to progress. Even the races between our rival hose-cart teams he calls 'a wild cat in the chicken house of peace and prosperity,' and he proposes to publish a paper to remedy it."

"Say, who owns this chicken house you mention?" inquires Shirt-tail. "I'd like to buy some eggs. I ain't et a egg in so long I've plumb fergot how to hull one."

"Cowboy," Shumwalt assures him, "you string along with me in this man's town and you won't have to

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buy eggs: You'll get 'em handed to you!"

"Or throwed at you," I add under my breath.

All this time this two-hundred-and-twenty-pound star-totin' lunk called Dunk ain't said a word. Big bull, little beller. But he's been right on hand.

IT'S several days later that me and Shirt-tail partake of our first sample of this "pleasant, friendly rivalry" ol' Shumwalt has spoke of. There's a practice race between the two hose-cart companies, and our side beats them Upper Town droop-tails plenty bad. The ruckus busts out when Shumwalt goes to collect on his hundred-dollar bet with Chalk-eye Chillingham, the mayor of Upper Town.

"I don't pay off on no crooked deal, Shumwalt," protests Chalk-eye. "First place, this chucklehead"—he glares toward me—"give my boys to understand it was jest a practice run, and they never even tried to run their best!"

"I never no suchuva," I busts in. "All I said was that I sure wouldn't bust a gut just to win a practice run an' be all stove up for the big race next week!"

"You see?" Shumwalt smiled. "Pay me, Chalk-eye!"

"In the second place," growls Mayor Chillingham, "this feller lopin' alongside a-hossback, swingin' a whip—it ain't only aginst the rules, it ain't humane!"

"That wasn't no whip," I protests again. "That was a bull snake. Can we help it if Shirt-tail can't run his best without he's skeered?"

"You see?" Shumwalt smiled again. "Pay off!"

"Like hell!" snorts Chalk-eye.

"Suit yourself," Shumwalt tells him with a shrug. "I've often wondered what a mayor's wife would do if she read in the paper a detailed report of how he spends his money on them business trips to El Paso. Of course, the newspaper might be mistaken, but—"

"Here, Shumwalt!" busts in Mayor Chillingham, shoving the money at him. "You know I never welsh on a bet! But that speckle-tailed jackass you run in the lead ain't no citizen of Dos Plazas. He's a ringer, an' I'm goin' to git him ruled out!"

Still I doubt if it would have come to a fight if Shirt-tail hadn't grabbed a fire ax.

"Mister," he squalls, waving the ax in Mayor Chillingham's face, "I don't know what a ringer is, but I'll be damned if you can call me one!"

Of course, with everybody already bristled up anyhow, that was the firecracker that blowed up granpaw. From then on it was a battle royal of ax handles and fists, no telling how many two-legged trees might have got chopped down, if there hadn't come an interruption in the shape of Horse-thief Charley with a hawgleg in each hand.

"Gents!" he says in that sharp, quiet tone that gits attention. "Is this dog fight over, or have I got to start blasting?"

One look at the nozzles of Charley's lead spitters, and the ruckus stops. I look around for Shumwalt to see what attitude he's going to take toward this interference with innocent firemen's fun, but he ain't there. Him and the gorilla have plumb vanished.

"If this," orates Horse-thief Charley, "is a fair sample of the results of friendly rivalry, maybe we all better forget it and get together as just one town, one fire department, one marshal, one mayor—and fewer fires, fights and taxes!"

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"Hooray!" I squalls. "Charley Maxwell for mayor!"

"Sounds all right," says a feller with a bloody nose. "But what about Shumwalt?"

That, it seems, is a question there don't nobody want to answer, and the gathering busts up.

"WHISTLE PANTS," says Charley, "can I speak to you a minute?"

So we kind o' stroll up the street with him.

"I got to apologize for trying to pretend I didn't know you fellers," he says.

"Oh, that's all right," Shirt-tail assures him. "We reelize a horse thief's got to be keerful!"

"That's just the point," says Charley. "I *ain't* a horse thief! I quit that wild bunch as quick as I got old enough to know better. I never *did* steal any horses personal, but every stolen horse I ever had anything at all to do with, I hunted up the owner and paid him back full value in cash. Since then I been going straight. I learned the printing trade, and with what's left of the money from my uncle, I come here to start up a newspaper—and got burned out."

"Shumwalt?" I inquires.

"No proof," says Charley. "But it's funny. I've got a couple rolls of paper stored in the parson's wood shed, and it caught fire just a while ago while you birds had the hose carts out on one of those fool races. I put it out myself."

"Speakin' of the parson's wood shed," I says, "yonder comes his purty daughter. Is she aimin' to marry you, Charley?"

Evidently she ain't, for when she comes by she high-noses right past without even speakin'.

"It's these shootin' irons," Charley sighs. "She don't believe in gun smoke."

THAT evening I'm reading the latest Dos Plazas *Planet* like everybody else in Dos Plazas does, mostly to see what *ain't* in it. There's a whole colyum of such stuff, under the heading: ITEMS UNREVEALED, which run more or less like this:

Whose wife would get a divorce if she knew?

Under the pure white expanse of what Bar Tender's apron lies a fatal secret? (No hair on his chest, I expect.)

What uneasy pocket harbors the knife that cut Upper Town's fire hose causing them to lose the Water-squirting Contest?

Where did what well-known citizen go when he was supposed to have gone somewhere else?

Who would be surprised to learn that we have the proof in the form of two signed affidavits, to put him in the clutches of the law?

"Huh?" grunts Shirt-tail. "What's an affidavit?"

"An affidavit," I explain, "is where you swear something on paper an' sign your name to it."

"Any man," observes Shirt-tail, "that will go to the trouble of swearin' on paper when he ain't choked ain't nothin' but an idjit. Say, this Editor Binkley is sure a nice feller, not puttin' nothin' in no paper about nobody so nobody else won't know who he don't mean by it, ain't he?"

"Binkley prints what he's told to. It's a blackmail factory!"

"A what?"

"Whose likker I drink," I says, "his song I sing."

'Shucks, Whistle Pants," says Shirt-tail. "You don't sing no better drunk than sober. Let's git to bed."

AS far as Shirt-tail is concerned, he seems to be enjoying his job as lead jackass on Lower Town's hose-cart team. But I've got it

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down in my little tally book that the real reason we're fiddling around with such foolishness is that Shumwalt is liable to tell who cut that hose and get us lynched if we don't. As long as we stay in Dos Plazas, he's got us where the hair is short and aims to make use of us. In less than a week, Shirt-tail's phenomenal speed at the head of that hose-cart team has won two short practice races for Lower Town—and a couple hundred dollars in bets for Whiskers Shumwalt. Course, he's generous with it, too, buying drinks all around for both teams, but that don't alter the fact that he's makin' a steady profit out of the rivalry.

It looks like we ain't the only ones he's got in a jackpot, either. The rumors is that about half the citizens in Dos Plazas are secretly paying Shumwalt some kind of a percentage to keep him from publishing what he's got on 'em—or what they're afraid he's got, which amounts to the same thing. All of which makes this about the jumpiest burg I ever bogged down in, everybody suspicious of everybody and mighty few even willing to risk commenting on the weather till they find out what Shumwalt thinks about it.

Rivalry between the two towns naturally helps Shumwalt's game, for although he pretends to belong to the Lower Town faction, actually he helps keep Mayor Chalk-eye Chillingham and his gang in office, just like a nester sometimes throws out a little hay to a neighbor's cow, then milks her after dark. But like Shirt-tail says, he sure is nice about it.

The fact is, plenty citizens act like they think Shumwall's a fine feller, and them that would like to ambush him with a neck yoke some dark night don't get much of a chance on account of the way big Dunk always bodyguards him.

That's the kind of a wolf's nest Charley Maxwell had dug into when he come here to fall in love with a preacher's daughter, set up an honest newspaper and see if he can't unify the two towns. They're noble purposes, all three of them. But the next time we see Charley he ain't very happy over the prospects. In fact, he's purt' near as worried as a dog caught under a picket fence with a tin can on his tail and a wasp on his nose.

"Hi yah, Charley," I greet him. "How's the future editor and mayor of Greater Dos Plazas?"

He sounds bitter as a last year's acorn.

"You ought to know," he says.

"Us? Maybe you better tell us what's itchin' you!"

"Maybe you didn't read in Shumwalt's blackmail column," he says sarcastic, "about them two affidavits he's aiming to whip me out of town with."

"Shucks!" I grins. "Booze Binkley makes up them threats by the barrel. What makes you think it's aimed at you?"

"Because," says Charley, purty thin-lipped, "Shumwalt showed me the affidavits you and Shirt-tail signed and swore to, to the effect that you both knew me in Montana as a notorious rustler, horse thief, train robber, road agent, and all-'round bandit! And I thought you boys were my friends!"

"You're crazy," I says. "We never signed no suchuva— Oh-oh! Maybe I begin to savvy. Git your guns, Charley, an' we'll go down there an'—"

"No soap," busts in Charley. "Hilda's got 'em. I promised her I was done with the rough stuff. Not that it matters, because if Shum-

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walt publishes them affidavits I'll be done for with everyone in this town anyhow—including Hilda. And he's given me my choice: clear out or he'll publish 'em—for the good of the community."

"But what you gonna do?"

"Suck eggs, I expect—you double-crossing coyotes!" Charley says and quits us.

"What was he sayin' about affi-affi—you know them things you swear on?" inquires Shirt-tail after he's gone.

THE only answer I can think up for that is a groan, and I ain't no more than groaned it, when here comes Shumwalt with his whiskers and his bodyguard.

"Greetings, my good Christian friends," he says. "About that hose-cart race tomorrow: I think it's about time we let those Upper Town boys win one. You boys see to it that they do, understand?"

Of course I know what that means. It means that after using Shirt-tail's speed to build up favorable odds, now Shumwalt's gone and got somebody to place a lot of undercover bets for him on Upper Town for a clean-up. But hose-cart races ain't what's on my mind at the moment.

"Shumwalt," I says, "what about them affidavits?"

"Well, what about 'em?" he bristles. "You signed 'em, didn't you?"

"Signed, nothin'!" I snort. "All me and Shirt-tail have signed in this town was a couple blank sheets of paper!"

"They ain't blank now," says Shumwalt, smiling. "And according to the legal evidence of Binkley's notary seal and attest, they weren't blank when you signed 'em. If you don't like it, just try doing something about it, and I'll show 'em to your horse-thief friend's sweet pa-tootie and her pa so quick it'll dizzy a dog. Maxwell *is* your friend, isn't he?"

"Was." I shrug. "About that race tomorrow. Don't you worry, Shumwalt. We'll 'tend to it!"

"Good boy!" he says, tosses us a fiver apiece, and departs.

"Nice feller," says Shirt-tail. "What you reckon he give us this money for?"

When I explain that it's payment in advance for throwing the hose-cart race to Upper Town tomorrow, Shirt-tail purt' near throws a fit an' falls over in it. But I finally calm him down.

"It's just a joke," I says. "Imagine them Upper Town droop tails tryin' to bribe *us* to throw a race! You just keep your trap shut and maybe we can backfire it right in their faces."

"O. K., Whistle Pants," he sighs. "Only be sure you git a good big snake to skeer me with, so I'll run my best!"

"You do like I say," I advise him, "and we won't need no snake! Pull your boots off now an' play with your toes a while. I'm going over to chaw fat with the parson."

Of course Shirt-tail ain't quite as dumb as he makes out he is. Or as I make out he is, for that matter. But he's dumb enough for most general purposes.

But Hilda Porter ain't. And it's *her* I chaw the fat with, not her pa. I purt' near talked my tongue off and still wasn't sure whether I convinced her of anything or not except that I'm a long-winded waddy with wattles on my windpipe. All I know when I leave is that she sure bats her eyes purty when she's mad. But just who she's most mad at I can't be sure.

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THE day of the great hose-cart race dawned fair as a fish eye, with only a gentle twenty-mile breeze to bestir the folds of floating flags and raise geese pimples on the bony bare knees of sixteen prancing hose-cart pullers as they line up.

This is the way these hose-cart races are run: Eight fellers stripped practically to their underpants line up on both sides of a slim wagon tongue protruding from a big spool of fire hose racked on wheels, each man grabs a leather pull strap, which practically hitches 'em up like an eight-horse team—and at the starting signal, away they go. Whichever side gits there and gits their spool of hose unwound first is the winner. But each team can pick its own route to git there, and of course they keep it a secret which-away they aim to run.

Just a few minutes before this race is ready to start, I see Charley Maxwell coyotin' around the edge of the crowd, hat pulled down over his eyes, looking purty much like a fresh-kicked pup. Purty soon he straightens up and strides over to the platform where Shumwalt is airing his U. S. Grant whiskers as master of ceremonies, says something to him, then strides away again. I look through the crowd for a sight of Hilda Porter, but don't see her, which is all to the good, because Charley seems to be looking for her, too, and I can see he ain't in no mood to act sweet.

I'm a-horseback myself, so I leave Shirt-tail prancin', archin' his neck and whinnyin' at the lead pull strap of the Lower Town hose cart like he was all horse and a-hellin' to run, and bust through to speak to Charley.

"Hi yah, Horse-thief," I greet him. "She may be here, but I ain't seen her."

"Never mind!" he growls.

"What was you sayin' to Shumwalt?"

"I was informing him," says Charley, kind o' stiff in the neck, "that as soon as this fool race is over, I'm going to kill him! And I'm looking for Miss Porter to inform her of the same."

"Tsk! Tsk!" I says. "Such plans ought to be 'Items Unrevealed!' Anyhow I'm glad you ain't going to spoil the race by doing it now!"

Just then the starter hollers ready. Though they've ruled me out as a snake charmer to spook the speed out of Shirt-tail, each side is allowed one man a-horseback to ride ahead and clear the streets for 'em—if he can keep ahead, the way them hombres run—and I'm It for our side.

Bang goes the starter's gun and yonder they go, neck and neck down Middle Street. Both teams still purt' near neck and neck at the middle of the next block, when I see the Upper Town team spurt for a little lead and I know what it means. It means they're aiming to cut across through Hitchrack Alley, just as expected. I look back and recognize Shirt-tail's shirt tail fanning the breeze. In fact, he's the only one that's got a shirt on. Claims the breeze of it cools him. Also he's the only one horse-muscled and iggerunt enough to pull the whole load when the others can't keep up with him. That's why he's lead jackass on the team—and also why it wins. Fast as he's whippin' the breeze, now I can see he's got one eye out, watching me, just like I told him to.

"Waugh!" I squalls and sail my hat across in front of him.

THAT'S all it takes. Snorting like a half-broke bronc, Shirt-tail spooks at the hat. As sudden as a shot-at coyote, he shies off to the

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right, smack into them Upper Town leaders. What with the momentum of his whole team and upset hose cart all smacking into 'em at once, them Upper Town droop tails go down like a row of dominoes, and before they can git up, ol' Shirt-tail, still playin' spooked horse, has got about half the hose off their cart looped and knotted every which way around everybody's legs.

Naturally a few fists begin to fly, and what a tangle!

It's about then that ol' Shumwalt first sees the smoke down on Railroad Avenue, for here he comes racing down the street, bawling: "Fire! Fire! Confound it, men, get straightened out here! My newspaper office is on fire!"

When he don't get no response, he turns to big Dunk.

"Get in there and grab that hoss cart, you big ox!" he yowls.

"I ain't no dang fireman," says Dunk and don't budge.

"Git in there! You can pull it alone!" Shumwalt gives his bodyguard a shove.

Big Dunk looks at him kind o' funny.

"Don't push me!" he says, and cracks Shumwalt over the head with his six-gun.

By the time Shumwalt comes to, me and Shirt-tail have dragged him up on the platform by the scruff of the neck.

With Horse-thief Charley's assistance, the hose cart ruckus has stopped, while down on Railroad Avenue the Dos Plazas *Planet* has done gone up in smoke—including a couple of forged affidavits and a heap of other documents Shumwalt has been holding over people's head for the payoff. Already the crowd seems to realize that something purty momentous has happened, and when I raise my hand for silence, they give it.

"Ladies and gents," I orate, "whose fault it was that our racing firemen didn't never reach this fire an' put it out is one of them 'Items Unrevealed' that you've all heard about. But here's Mr. Shumwalt with an announcement to make!"

Shirt-tail and me drag him to his feet between us, but all he's able to say after that wallop Dunk give him is: "Glub!"

"What he says, folks," I interpretate, "is that before departing from our midst . . . on a rail . . . Mr. Shumwalt is donating what money we found on him toward buying united Greater Dos Plazas a regular fire engine, with *horses* to pull it, so when there's a fire it'll git there! An' if you don't believe Dos Plazas is gonna be united, allow me to interduce Mr. Charley Maxwell, your future mayor, who's gonna unite it! If there's any objections—"

"Well, if there was any, the applause plumb drowned 'em out. We never rode ol' Shumwalt out on a rail, neither. We didn't have to, once he come to and learnt what had happened.

"Great goose feathers!" sighs Shirt-tail, watching them Civil War whiskers fan the breeze as Shumwalt legs it for parts unknown. "*That* feller oughta been on the team!"

As for how come Shumwalt's blackmail factory to ketch fire just at the right time—that better just remain one of them "Items Unrevealed."

Maybe it started from a cigarette somebody laid down and forgot. But I'd sure hate to accuse a preacher's daughter of smokin'!

THE END

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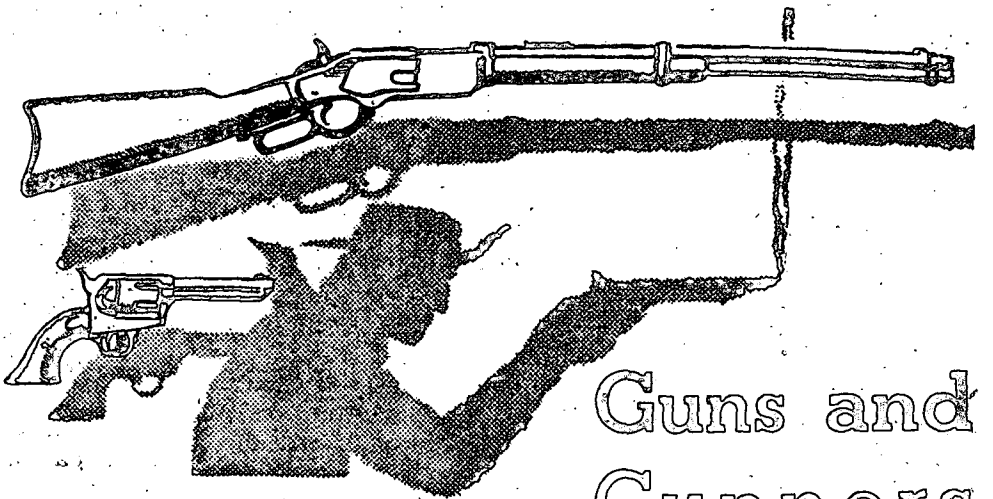

Guns and Gunners

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

YES, individuals can be taught to shoot a revolver or pistol without the expenditure of a great deal of ammunition. Today that is important Millions and millions of small-arms cartridges are rolling daily from our war plants, but all is for military use, none for even essential civilian use as guard work.

Some defense plants are pooling their guard instruction through competent police instructors. But they must have classroom instruction. Can an instructor take a class of beginners on a range and really teach shooting? I doubt it. Here's the reason:

Any well-organized range operates on a clockwork basis. The instructor is called the "range officer." His job is to keep the range in operation, maintain safety standards, and see that shooting schedules are not delayed. If he were to make expert shots of his men he would need a coach for every man on the firing line. This is important. The coach should concentrate on just one man and help him to correct each mistake. He cannot do his best work even with two men.

Many preliminary errors can be corrected in a classroom before going on the range. Many can be self-eliminated by studying the following shooting comments. Try this yourself.

First—let's assume that you have a revolver. Inspect it carefully and make certain that it is not loaded. Open and examine the gun. *Never* pull the trigger until you do this. Do not trust yourself or your memory that you had not loaded it since you last looked. That's the way accidents happen.

Study the design of the gun. Different makes and different models of the same make feel different in the hand. Some have small frames. When in shooting position, finger on the trigger, the second knuckle joint of the second finger may be in contact with the trigger guard. That's the reason the trained shooter prefers large-frame guns. If that knuckle joint contacts the trigger guard due to insufficient space between the inside strap of the frame

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—between the two grips or stocks—recoil will hurt. More beginning shooters are spoiled this way than any other.

This is always a headache to instructors. The beginner gets hurt the first shot. Thereafter he anticipates further injury and flinches or jerks the trigger; result, no hit. Small-frame guns can be shot to eliminate this injury if the position of the hand is lowered on the grip. Curl the little finger *under* the butt of the gun. This gives you the same hand position for each shot, steadies the gun, and eliminates the danger of a bruise.

Practice holding the gun without strangling it. A light hold is all that is necessary.

Position is important. Practice shooting positions. Everyone knows the "conventional" position. You should use it *only as a guide*. There is no one position for all shooters. Humans vary. Only the basic fact is important. Stand with your weight on both feet, the feet spread until you are comfortable. Don't imitate the other fellow. Find your own position.

How can you tell? Get into what you call your shooting position, aim the empty gun at some target, hold the position and close the eyes for a full moment. If your weight is not evenly distributed, you'll feel yourself falling forward or backward. Prove this to yourself.

At what angle should you place the body toward the target? Only you can determine. Take what you think is the right angle. Aim at the target, gun held loosely but firmly. Do not try to stretch the arm—many beginners do. There should be no strain in the shoulder, at the elbow, or in the wrist. Find that position for yourself; no instructor can do it for you.

Now look away from the target for a moment, gun arm lowered to the side. Before you look at it again, shut your eyes, then, while blind, raise the gun arm and take aim at where you think the target is. When you have your position, open the eyes. Where are you aiming? Probably off to one side or the other. Reason? Body position. Shift the body, not the arm.

Practice this carefully. You can't take too much of this dry practice unless you try to do it mechanically and carelessly. Make believe you are shooting. Concentrate on the job.

Position of the other hand while shooting? Get rid of it. Put it in a pocket, rest it on a hip, stick it in your belt—anything that permits you to get your mind off it and keep it from swinging and disturbing the body.

Anyone who is willing to work hard at this dry practice—and the experts do it all the time to keep in shape—will learn the basic shooting rules. When he then appears on the range he will be a great relief to his instructor. And he will learn to shoot quickly.

● This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, United States Army. He will continue to answer all letters from readers, either civilians or members of the services, with the least possible delay. Just address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*

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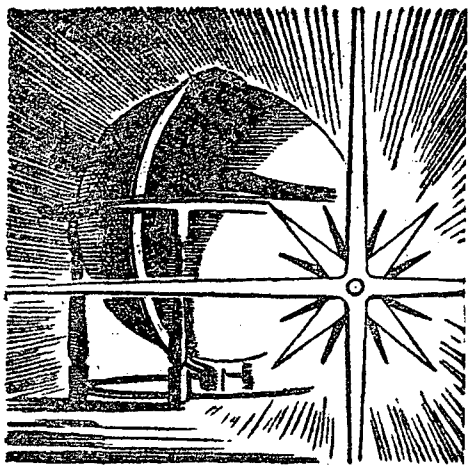

Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

CARIBOU STEAK is a rarity as far as most outdoorsmen are concerned. Yet in the early exploration of Alaska the wandering herds of caribou, sometimes numbering as much as a half million animals in a single herd, made it possible for men to live in sections where it would have been hard to survive otherwise.

In Alaska caribou took the place of the buffalo that formerly roamed the Western plains. Many a pioneer prospector in the far North and many an early Alaskan mining camp depended almost wholly on this heavy-antlered member of the deer family for their meat. The caribou furnished food for man, and also for his dogs.

In addition light caribou skins are generally considered by northern trappers as better than buckskin. Tanned caribou skin does not stretch when wet and if it is tanned with the hair on, it makes the warmest of all vests or jackets. Indian-tanned caribou hide is as good as moosehide for moccasins, and moosehide is about the best material there is. Some even go so far as to say that caribou is better.

"I am interested in the caribou herds in Alaska," wrote C. B. from Little Rock, Arkansas. "Do large herds still exist up there? Are they valuable? Is the meat used today? What are caribou like?"

Some of the more isolated mining camps in Alaska still depend pretty much on caribou for their fresh meat. Even so, perhaps because the country is as yet but sparsely settled, the herds have not been ruthlessly decimated as were the buffalo herds in the Western prairie regions. Nevertheless they have decreased through various causes over a large part of the Territory. There are said to be none left in the Kenai Peninsula, and only a few on the Alaska Peninsula.

The largest remaining herds are found in the interior in the Yukon-Tanana Valley sections. They are international travelers, their migrations taking them back and forth between Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory. A few years ago the total number of caribou in this section was estimated at between one and two million animals.

The professional hunter who in pioneer days made a business of supplying meat for frontier camps has been blamed for the extermination or near extermination of many of our wild animals. But it wasn't he who whittled down the caribou so extensively. Neither was it the wolves who regularly follow the caribou herds. The introduction and raising of reindeer on a large scale seems most to blame.

Wherever the commercial reindeer-herds were established the caribou

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were forced to disappear. Both couldn't occupy the same range.

The caribou lives farther north than any other member of the deer family, though the moose sometimes invades the southern fringe of the former's range. In size, a caribou runs somewhere between a mule deer and an elk, usually closer to the mule deer. Adult buck caribou will dress out to about two hundred and fifty pounds. Their live weight is around three hundred and fifty pounds. Does are much lighter, dressing on the average perhaps a hundred and fifty pounds.

Both male and female caribou normally carry antlers. In the autumn an adult doe may easily be mistaken for a young buck because of this. Caribou have large, heavy antlers that sweep back and upward from the forehead, then curve forward near the tip. Usually they have in addition a pair of broad "brow tines" flattened into a vertical "shovel" that extends forward nearly to the nose.

There is an old story among Alaskan sourdoughs that caribou use this "shovel" to dig away snow in uncovering the lichens and reindeer moss on which it loves to feed. Scientists say this isn't so. They claim caribou use their front hoofs as scrapers just like other members of the deer family that graze in winter. Besides they point out not all caribou have the "shovels" as extra equipment. Furthermore most of the does, fawns and young bucks, even if equipped have not got the "shovels" well enough developed for any digging.

In color markings as well as in their antlers caribou are distinctive. Dark brown in body they have a white neck and a long white beard. The white, as a rule, reaches back over the shoulders and continues as a more or less sharply defined band along the sides.

The Alaska-Yukon caribou are essentially mountain animals. Much of the area they frequent is above timber line in some places. They do, however, visit lower country more or less regularly at certain seasons but the best place to watch for them is along ridges and on the divides that separate one large drainage basin from another.

For instance the Yukon-Tanana herds in their annual migrations commonly are most abundant along the high divide between the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. Similarly caribou are found in the mountains between the Koyukuk and Chandalar Rivers. The rivers themselves mean little as an obstacle. Caribou are excellent swimmers.

To J. R., Somerville, Massachusetts: Over in Maine they were mighty "meat" conscious last deer season. Hunters there set a new all-time record in 1942, bagging 22,301 deer. Previous high was in 1940 with 22,209 deer recorded.

At the time the new record was made, it was pointed out the season's deer catch would yield about 2,676,120 pounds of venison.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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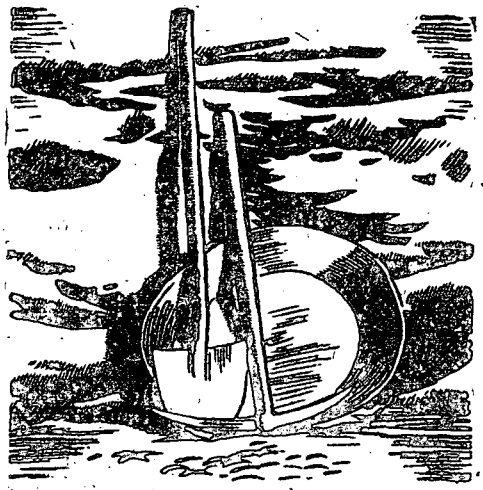

Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

IDAHO is rich in mineral wealth. Its mines have already produced millions in gold, silver, copper, zinc and lead. Big mines have made history in Idaho, but there are still many hard-to-reach wilderness sections where the small-scale prospector and placer miner can pan gold along the mountain streams, or set up his sluice boxes and recover yellow metal from the gravels of some isolated creek. Some of the bars along the bigger rivers, like the Snake and Salmon, also offer a means of livelihood to the earnest gold seeker.

"Where," asks J. P., of Hamilton, Ohio, bluntly, "is placer gold found in Idaho? Some day I am going out there—for keeps. And I am going to try my hand at prospecting. How about a list of the placer districts in that State?"

Even if there were room in these pages to list *all* the districts in Idaho from which placer gold has been derived, such a list might lead to erroneous conclusions. Though gold is one of the State's most widely distributed metals and has been found in most of Idaho's counties, some of the older districts are pretty well worked out by this time.

Here, however, is a summary listing of a substantial portion of the areas from which actual gold-placer production has been recorded during recent years. It should help the prospector with Idaho in mind in so far as hunting for gold in a territory known to produce it is likely to prove more profitable than hit-or-miss prospecting. On the other hand, the list should not prevent those willing to venture farther afield from gambling on their chances of success in new sections or in mineralized areas in which prospecting has to date drawn a blank. New discoveries sometimes turn up in such regions whether they be far from a known producing field, or right next door to one.

Ada County: Small-scale placer operators have been taking gold from bars along the Boise River, and from gravels in the Snake River district near Grandview.

Adams County: Gold obtained from claims along the Snake River.

Benewah County: Try Tyson Creek in the Camas Cove section.

Boise County: Placer gold recently recovered from claims on Crooked River, Gold Fork, and Edna Creeks in the Banner district. The Boise Basin district a large producer, but mostly from bucket dredge operations. Boise River in the Twin Springs district, the Garden Valley district and south fork of the Payette River are other sites of gold placering.

Bonneville County: Try the south fork of the Snake River near Heise, or the Mt. Pisgah district.

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Canyon County: Placer gold along the Snake River near Melba.

Clearwater County: An important placer producer. Clearwater River, north fork of the Clearwater, Burnt Creek, Moose Creek and Pierce all likely districts.

Custer County: Bayhorse, Stanley, Stanley Basin and Yankee fork areas.

Elmore County: Twin Springs district and bars along Snake River near King Hill.

Gem County: Placer gravels near Montour in the West View district.

Idaho County: An important gold placer section. About twenty likely districts including Elk City, Florence, Salmon River around Shoup, Riggins and White Bird sections, Warren district, Dixie district, Kitchen Creek, Buffalo Hump and others.

Jerome County: Prospectors have been sluicing on their claims along the banks of the Snake River near Jerome, Murtaugh, Hansen and Eden.

Latah County: Moscow Mountain, Gold Creek and Hoodoo districts.

Lemhi County: Eureka Gibbonsville, Mackinaw, Kirtley Creek, Salmon River and Yellow Jacket districts among others.

Lewis County: Sluicing along Salmon River.

Nez Perce County: Placering along the Snake River below Lewiston.

Owyhee County: Placering along Snake River section near Grandview and Meadow Creek in the Steele district.

Power County: Placer gold recovered along the Snake River near American Falls.

Shoshone County: Beaver district, Placer Center district, and the region around Murray.

Twin Falls County: Placer gold recovered at various points along the Snake River.

Valley County: Try the south fork of the Salmon, or the Thunder Mountain district. Placer gold has also been recovered from claims in the Deadwood Basin area.

Washington County: Small-scale operators have been working their claims and taking gold from gravels along the Snake River.

To W. F., San Diego, California: The Yellow Pine district in Valley County, central Idaho, is rapidly becoming one of the State's important mining areas. This is particularly true because of the relatively new discoveries of needed, strategic metals that have been made there.

Primarily a gold-lode section, extensive development of the gold deposits plus recent exploratory work has disclosed the existence of bodies of both antimony and tungsten in the region. Early reports have estimated the antimony deposit as probably being one of the great reserves of that metal in the country—about two and a half million tons of ore.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

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High in the mountains of Wyoming there's the little mining town of Merna—and to hear young Barbara Joanne Roberts tell it, it's no place for a tenderfoot. The townfolks of Merna are snowed in six months of the year and gasoline rationing doesn't affect their mode of travel at all, for they're used to getting around on snowshoes and skiis. This little mining town is badly in need of a teacher, a "tough" teacher, says Barbara—not a tenderfoot like the last one who quit and ended the "book larnin'" for the Merna school children. How about answering Barbara's plaintive appeal for Pen Pals—and a schoolmarm who can *take* it

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to have my letter printed in The Hollow Tree. I am eleven years old and live at Merna, Wyoming, which is high in the mountains. We are snowed in six months every year; there is three feet of snow on the level here now (January 3rd). We haven't had any school this year because we had a tenderfoot teacher who couldn't take it and quit, and it gets pretty lonesome, so I would enjoy corresponding with someone. Our only way of traveling now is on snowshoes or skiis. There are lots of elk, moose, deer, bear, mountain sheep and coyotes around here. We see three moose nearly every day from our house. And if any of you know of any tough schoolteachers who would teach mine kids for one hundred and ten dollars a month, we would sure like to hear from them.—Barbara Joanne Roberts, Merna, Wyoming

A radio career is his ambition—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would you please print a letter in your Hollow Tree for me? I am a lonely farm boy and I would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots with all. My ambition is to become a radio star some day.—Vestin Austill, R. F. D. No. 1, Kennett, Missouri

Lydia has lots of interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an eighteen-year-old high-school senior who wants Pen Pals between eighteen and twenty-three years of age. I have light-brown hair, brown eyes, and attractive smile, stand five feet six inches tall, and weigh 124 pounds. If you are interested in reading, good music, jazz, and all sports, please write to me. I collect and will swap school newspapers and cheers. Love dancing, riding, swimming and skating and am interested in photography, too. So all you fellows and girls who are interested in the same things I am, write please.—Lydia E. Tomasko, 151 North Road, Westfield, Massachusetts

Dorothy is a new Hollow Tree fan—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have just become a fan of The Hollow Tree and I'm hoping to get some Pen Pals. I am fifteen years old, and my favorite hobby is writing letters. I promise to answer everyone promptly, so come on, all you letter writers, and answer me.—Dorothy Barry, 9 Maple Street, Binghamton, New York

Here's a young radio star—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a fifteen-year-old girl and hope that through The Hollow Tree I will find some girls my age who would like to be my Pen Pals. I have brown hair and eyes, and five feet one inch tall, and weigh eighty-six pounds. I am a mezzo-soprano, and on Saturday mornings at 9 a. m. I sing on a radio program over station WORL in Boston. I get a lot of enjoyment from appearing on this Safety Squad program and also good experience which will help me later on in life. I am a Girl Scout and belong to various clubs at the church which I attend. My hobbies are stamp collecting and writing letters. I would like to correspond with some girls from Idaho, North and South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, California and Texas, so please write, girls. I'll try to answer every letter and send pictures and souvenirs.—Natalie Ayler, 49 Madison Avenue, Everett, Massachusetts

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Ladies, write to this shut-in—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been a reader of Western Story for quite some time and now would like to try to have a letter printed in The Hollow Tree. I sincerely hope you will publish this in your column. I am a veteran of the first World War and am a patient here in this sanitarium. I am six feet tall, weigh 180 pounds, have blue eyes and brown hair and am forty-one years old. The doctors tell me I will be well and out of here in about six months. In the meantime I would like to hear from ladies between thirty and forty years of age. I'll be looking for lots of letters.—Paul F. Nelson, Oak Knoll Sanitarium, Mackinaw, Illinois

Husky Alex likes outdoor life—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I hope you will print my plea in The Hollow Tree. I have been a reader of Western Story for the past two years and am very anxious to have Pen Pals. I am a bright-looking husky boy, *nineteen yers old, five feet ten inches tall.* I am very interested in sports and outdoor activities and also enjoy the movies. I collect photos and Western novelties. Here's hoping I will hear from lots of Pen Pals—come on, boys and girls, and write to me.—Alex Zvezdich, 5310 South Thirty-eighth Street, Omaha, Nebraska

Joan is one of our youngest members—

Dear Miss Rivers:
This is my first try at getting into The Hollow Tree and I sincerely hope my plea is printed. I have answered several Pen Pals, but received only one answer. I am thirteen years old, have dark-brown hair and blue eyes and I would like to hear from boys and girls between twelve and seventeen years of age. I will answer letters from anybody, though, and promise to answer all letters.—Joan Wagner, Templeton, Iowa

Shorthand lessons for the asking—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am putting in a plea for a few Pen Pals and hope it is printed. I am a widower fifty-seven years old and a native American. My son is in the armed forces, and since I am not able to work, I am very lonely. My hobbies are meteorology and mechanics. I will teach a new system of shorthand absolutely free of charge to anyone who is interested in learning it. I would like to hear from those of the opposite sex, but will answer letters from anyone, old or young.—W. K. Elmer, 7 South Nineteenth Street, San Jose, California

Welcome to our friendly corner, Harry—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been reading Western Story for years and The Hollow Tree, but never before asked to join in the fun. Now I'd like to have some Pen Pals of all ages. I am thirty years old, have brown hair, gray eyes and like all sports. Will exchange snapshots with all, so send 'em along.—Harry D. Baker, 19 W. Church Avenue, York, Pennsylvania

How about some cheery letters?

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a reader of Western Story, so won't you please print my plea for Pen Pals. I am a partly disabled veteran of the last war, live all by myself and get very lonesome. I am five feet eight inches tall and have blue eyes and brown hair. As a hobby I collect picture post cards and snapshots. Come on, pals, and cheer a fellow up with cards and long letters.—Albert Crawford, Box 613, Portales, New Mexico

Sure hope we don't disappoint Emily—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a nineteen-year-old blue-eyed blonde, I live on a farm here and like it, but I do get lonesome. I am trusting you to help me get Pen Pals by the numbers.—Emily Rascher, R. R. No. 1, Fillmore, Illinois

Dawn will help you with your hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:
The Hollow Tree column is so interesting and gives lonely people so much happiness, will you print a plea for me there? I am a widow thirty years old, and would like to have Pen Pals from everywhere. I will try to help all with their hobbies. I collect books and miniature articles. Here's hoping I get lots of letters soon.—Dawn Godfrey, 194 S. Estrella, Los Angeles, California

The big city's a lonesome place—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to join The Hollow Tree if I could. I am a lonely boy seventeen years old, have light-brown hair and brown eyes, am five feet eleven inches tall and weigh 159 pounds. I would like to receive letters from boys and girls all over the world. I just moved to the city and am very lonely.—William Burns, 3544 Wayne, Kansas City, Missouri

Fill this cowgirl's mailbox—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I hope you will publish my plea for Pen Pals. I am eighteen years old, have blue eyes and brown hair and am considered fairly nice-looking. I live on a ranch and love horseback riding. I also love to dance and enjoy writing letters. I promise to answer all letters and exchange photos, so come on, gang—boys and girls between fifteen and twenty-five years of age—and fill my mailbox.—Dolly Akin, Byers, Colorado

Photos to the first fifteen—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a boy seventeen years old and a native of Tennessee, but am living with some friends here in New Jersey. I am five feet eight inches tall and have black hair and dark-brown eyes. I haven't been here very long and am quite lonesome. I love all sports and have lots of hobbies. I will send photos to the first fifteen who write, so come on, pals, and sling some ink my way.—R. C. Moore, care of Ed Hartsell, Rt. No. 3, Bridgeton, New Jersey

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Lulu collects autographs—

Dear Miss Rivers:
This is the first time I have sent a plea to The Hollow Tree and I hope I am successful in getting some Pen Pals. I am five feet three inches tall, a brunette with blue eyes. I would like to correspond with boys and girls from everywhere and promise to answer all letters. I am sixteen years old and go to Millsap High School where I am a junior. My hobby is collecting autographs and post cards. Come on, boys and girls, and write to this gal way down here "deep in the heart of Texas."—Lulu Mae Colwell, Rt. No. 1, Garner, Texas

For girls only—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been a reader of Western Story for a long time, but have never before sent in a letter to be printed in The Hollow Tree. I am interested in collecting post cards and would like to have one from each State. I am only interested in girl pals between sixteen and twenty-five years of age. I am twenty-two, five feet three inches tall, and have brown hair and gray eyes. I will send a picture of myself to all who answer this plea and inclose a picture of themselves.—Frank M. Orr, 725 North California Street, Stockton, California

This young mother is waiting for mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like very much to join the pleasant group which surrounds The Hollow Tree. I am very fond of Western Story and so is my husband. I am twenty-one years old, have blond hair, blue eyes and am five feet, four inches tall. My hobbies are doing fancywork and collecting earrings. I have a two-year-old daughter. Would like to hear from married or single pals and age isn't important. Won't somebody please answer my plea? I'll be waiting.—Mrs. Richard Weed, 15623 Colby Avenue, Harvey, Illinois

Some information wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:
May I come to The Hollow Tree again as I am short on Pen Pals once more. I had been prospecting for five years and when the war broke out I came down here to work in the shipyards. But as soon as it's over I want to go back and take up where I left off. I want to try the most out-of-the-way place I can find in British Columbia, somewhere along the new highway. I want to hear from anyone who can give me some information about prospecting, trapping and hunting in British Columbia. I wouldn't mind taking a pardner along who has lived up there and knows the trapping game.—L. M. Ryberg, 554 Williams Street, Oakland, California

This Cape Cod lass likes yodeling—

Dear Miss Rivers:
May I join The Hollow Tree? I am a sixteen-year-old girl, have medium-brown hair, dark-blue eyes, and am five feet four inches tall. I like bicycling, skating and baseball about as well as any sports. I am a real cowboy fan and go for singing and yodeling in a big way. Won't some of you boys and girls from all over the United States write to a shy girl?—Norma Crowley, 24 Jones Road, Falmouth, Massachusetts

Virginia has tried before—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Please print my plea in your Pen Pal department as I really love to write and receive letters. Anyone from twenty to forty-five years of age is welcome. I like music, am learning to play the accordian, and as a hobby collect stamps, view cards, handkerchiefs and statuettes, which I will exchange to help others with their hobbies. I am single, thirty years old, five feet six inches tall, and have blue eyes and brown hair. I'd sure love to get some mail from all over the world as well as right here in the United States. This is my second attempt, so don't disappoint me this time.—Virginia Potter, P. O. Box 938, Indianapolis, Indiana

Bernice is lonely—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would greatly enjoy corresponding with Pen Pals for letter writing is my favorite hobby. I am interested in mural painting and play the piano. I am working away from home and it is rather lonely here. I hope I will get many Pen Pals.—Bernice Lett, Hitchita, Oklahoma

Writing letters is Howard's hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a young man twenty-five years old and would like to join The Hollow Tree gang, as one of my favorite hobbies is writing to Pen Pals in other States and nations. My other hobbies are collecting stamps, photography and reading. I live on a farm and especially enjoy taking pictures of country scenes. I will exchange snapshots with all who care to do so and will try to answer all letters. So come on, Pen Pals, and write to me.—Howard Hardy, New Albany, Kansas

Lonely boys heed this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am eighteen years of age and would like to correspond with boys who are far away from home and lonely and anyone else who cares to write me. I have various hobbies and would like to hear about yours. I will answer all letters and sure hope I get some soon.—Ida Fauble, Keithsburg, Illinois

Sunny Clotilde is a schoolmarm—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Is there room for a schoolteacher to sit under your Hollow Tree? If you can visualize a twenty-four-year-old schoolteacher, five feet two inches tall, brown curly hair and brown eyes, you have a pretty good idea of what I look like. My birthday is in August which accounts for my sunny disposition, and I like all sports, particularly tennis and hiking. Maybe you have a dread for teachers left over from your school days, but I'm a third-grade teacher, so don't let that stop you. I'd like to hear from some of you girls between sixteen and twenty-six.—Clotilde Dreeisler, Rt. No. 4, Westminster, Maryland

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The Roundup

Continued from page 6

first issue effected by this change was the one immediately following the February 13th issue. The date on the cover was March 20, 1943, and it went on sale *two weeks after the February 13th issue—on February 19th.*

We explained in our announcement, too, that there might be some delay in the delivery of future issues because of transportation priorities. This has undoubtedly happened, and, of course, we are sorry. But we must remember that troops and military equipment for our armed forces have first call on our transportation facilities. Our Army and Navy and Marines *must* come first. We know you understand this, and so we ask you to be patient and co-operate with us as much as possible.

There's been a debate going on in the Roundup for some time over the striking force of a bullet. Author L. L. Foreman touched off the controversy when he stated that a bullet could knock a man down, or turn him halfway around. Since then we've had considerable letters on the subject, some for and some agin'. The latest addition to our powder powwow comes from Corporal Robert Boyd, who's making good use of his knowledge of firearms in the Army. Says Corporal Boyd:

I am ready to challenge the statements of those who argue with Author Foreman that a bullet can't knock a man down. And, brother, I'm in a position to know.

I was shot accidentally in December by an old .45 Cavalry Colt pistol using steel-jacketed, blunt-nosed shells. The force of the bullet spun me around completely and when I had made one turn the cords in back of my knees seemed to give way completely and I went down like a ton of bricks.

Though I was hit in the right shoulder about four inches from the top and four inches from the side, I never lost consciousness, and the thought kept running through my head while I was spinning that I wasn't going to go down after all. I guess this was because, a week or so before, I had been giving instructions with the same type gun and had stated flatly that any man hit by one of its bullets would be knocked flat. Well, it developed that I was right, and let me add that when that bullet hit me it felt as though I'd been hit with a sledge hammer.

I'm up and around now and feel O. K., but it's an experience I wouldn't care to have repeated.

I wish you would mention this in the Roundup so that those who argue about a bullet hitting a man who is standing on two legs can be more powerful than the same bullet hitting a deer who is standing on four legs. I know.

We reckon you would, Corporal, and we might add that you make your augerment sound mighty convincing.

While we're talking about soldiers, we might thank Mr. E. B. Marshall of Sutter, California, for following a suggestion that was made a few Roundups ago about donating back issues of Western Story to the boys in various camps. Mr. Marshall writes:

I've been reading Western Story for so many years I can't remember when I started. A few years ago I disposed of eight hundred and sixty copies of Western Story and about two weeks ago donated three hundred and forty copies to the boys at Camp Beal, Marysville, California. The soldiers, I can tell you, were very much pleased.

That's a powerful lot of copies, Mr. Marshall, representing about twenty-two years of Western Story reading matter. Knowing how much you old-timers prize your back files of W. S., we want to thank you again. Your gift was most generous.

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THE RANGE FINDERS

by Allan Vaughan Elston

PART III

At villages along the route of the Santa Fe Trail, brown faces stared at the drove of Hereford cattle—the like of which they had never seen before.

The Story So Far:

Bound for Santa Fe by way of Taos, Johnny Cameron hears shots and rides to the help of a renegade-attacked burro train. Two of the bandits, Americans, are killed. The third, a masked man, apparently a Mexican, escapes and Johnny picks up a glove he has dropped. Johnny, whose horse has been killed in the fight, rides to Taos in the buckboard of Don Ygnacio Sandoval, owner of the burro train. There he is able to trace the glove to the store from which it was purchased, but can get no information about the man who bought it.

On the way back to his tavern, Johnny is waylaid by the masked bandit, who manages to rope and hold him helpless. After delivering a warning to Johnny to mind his own business, the bandit disappears.

In Santa Fe Johnny is the honored guest of Don Ygnacio during the annual fiesta. With the rest of the household he attends a ball at which he is introduced to Don Ramon de la Montoya, the fiancé of Don

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Ygnacio's granddaughter. To his amazement, Johnny recognizes the voice of Don Ramon as that of the masked bandit of Cimarron Canyon.

Realizing he can offer no proof of Don Ramon's treachery, Johnny decides not to make any accusation until he can back it. He proceeds with the business which brought him to Santa Fe—to get the financial backing of Banker Stephen Elkins in bringing a herd of pure-bred Herefords to New Mexico. He and his four partners, who are to bring the herd, plan to homestead the *pozo hondo,* a section of range which offers good graze but which has been neglected because a gang of outlaws uses it for a hide-out.

Meanwhile, Don Ramon plots with Fadeaway Fallon, whose gang holes up in the *pozo hondo,* to rustle Johnny's valuable herd when it arrives.

CHAPTER XII

THE DONA GAMBLES

At the Sandoval hacienda the women were all busy sewing. Night and day they made ready for Josefita's wedding to Don Ramon Montoya. The event was scheduled for the girl's eighteenth birthday.

"But how do you know when that is?" Johnny Cameron asked one evening as he sat sipping wine with Don Ygnacio. "If you found her alongside the trail, wrapped in a buffalo robe, I can't savvy how you figure when she was born."

"Does it matter, señor?" Don Ygnacio waved a disparaging hand. "We bring her home and we christen her Josefita. The women are all there and they think the baby is about one year old. She is entitled to a birthday. So we decide that the day of christening shall be her first birthday. It was the twelfth day of December."

"Fair enough," Johnny said. "So she'll be married December twelfth?"

"*Si, señor.* And you must be at her wedding."

Johnny twisted a cigarette deftly. "Yeah," he said, "I'd like to be at her wedding." Under his breath he added: "But I don't mean Montoya's."

He still couldn't see any decent excuse for accusing Montoya. Any slight whisper against the man would immediately outrage the Sandovals and convict the guest of poor taste.

"You ride for the Pecos tomorrow?" inquired Don Ygnacio.

"Bright and early," Johnny said. "My outfit ought to be pretty well down the trail by now and I promised to meet 'em at the Pecos." The name gave him a thought and he smiled. "Know what they say back east, Don Ygnacio? They say there's no law west of the Pecos."

The idea semed to shock Don Ygnacio. "But that is not true, señor. Santa Fe is west of the Pecos. And my hacienda is west of Santa Fe. Is it not peaceful here?"

Strains of a fandango came from the peon quarters. "It's peaceful enough right here," Johnny agreed. "I reckon they mean places like the *pozo hondo.*"

"Even in the *pozo* there will be law, some day," declared Don Ygnacio.

"Yeah, and it won't be long," Johnny said. "The law says we can file land in the *pozo,* and we'll do it. The law says we can hold that land, with or without six-guns, and we'll do that. You just wait till Ogallala and Slim and Rosy and Sweetwater Smith start dishin' out law in the *pozo.*"

The idea amused Don Ygnacio. He refilled the wineglasses. "To law in the *pozo!*" he chuckled.

It was late. Johnny intercepted Josefita just before she retired. "I'll be off before you're up. So adios. You've sure treated me fine here."

"But you will be gone only a few

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days, señor. Then you will bring your friends here—"

"No use makin' a bunk shack out o' this hacienda," Johnny interrupted. "Nope, the outfit'll camp up the Puerco a ways, and we'll just drop in now and then of evenings."

She looked at him and her eyes were disturbed. "I'm afraid for you, señor. I mean when you go into the *pozo*."

"Don't fret about it," Johnny told her. "And, by the way, mind passin' on a message to Don Ramon? I won't be seein' him again soon."

"But of course. What shall I say to Don Ramon?"

"Just say I'm sorry I missed him."

"Oh! You had an appointment with him?"

"That's it. But we missed each other. Adios, Josephine."

AT daybreak Johnny was away on Muchacho, riding east toward Santa Fe. His Winchester was in the scabbard, with hammer and hammer screw in place. After a few miles Johnny tried it out on a coyote. The bullet kicked dust and proved there'd been no further sabotage.

Riding up through timber to the mesa was a risk. Any thicket might hide a sniper. Johnny advanced with caution. He knew that Montoya would stop at no trick of treachery. "He's out to burn us down, Muchacho. 'Cause he's scared we'll prove what we know."

The whirring of grouse startled Johnny. Then it reassured him. If a sniper were lurking there, the grouse would already have been flushed.

Chances were that Montoya didn't know the schedule. Johnny had been careful to say nothing about it until supper last night. And perhaps Montoya had as yet been unable to replace his spy at the hacienda.

It was a relief, though, to reach the open mesa. Johnny loped across this and dipped down into a tributary canyon of the Rio Grande. Soon he was splashing across the big river. From here Johnny kept an easy upgrade jog to Santa Fe.

It was past noon when he rode into the city. Santa Fe was slumbering. Along San Francisco Street Johnny saw no life except an occasional tamale man dozing over his tray, with here and there a burro switching at flies.

Even the plaza was in siesta. But the bank was open. Johnny went in there to see Stephen Elkins.

"Been expecting you, Cameron," the banker said. "Here's a telegram for you. And you'd better sign this note."

Johnny signed a note for fifteen thousand dollars. The telegram had been sent from El Moro, a trail town in Colorado. It read:

Heifers in good shape. Ought to make the Pecos in six more days.

The message was signed "Ogallala," and had been filed five days ago.

"I'll meet 'em at the Pecos tomorrow night," Johnny said.

Elkins sent out for coffee. "Did you have a look at the *pozo hondo?*" he asked.

"I did," Johnny said. "It's just the range I'm hunting for."

The banker gave him a searching look. He smiled when Johnny said no more. "Then you're not disturbed about outlaws over there?"

"No, sir."

Stephen Elkins liked the way he said it. "That's right, Cameron. The star of empire moves west and

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can't be stopped by the riffraff it pushes ahead of it. Our job's to bring along better tools. Steel plows for wooden plows. Wagons for ox carts. And now you're bringin' in Herefords to replace Mexico dogies."

"Some of the old-timers," Johnny suggested, "claim it won't work. They claim nothin' but longhorns'll do well in this greasewood country. They say it takes tough stock to live on a tough range."

"That doesn't worry me a bit," Elkins contested. "I've been reading up on these Hereford and Durham and Galloway breeds. They're tough. Their sires were toughened by the rigors of Scotland moors. So they should take to these New Mexico valleys like ducks to water." The coffee came and he pushed a cup toward his client.

"That's my idea exactly," Johnny said. "But these old-timers claim something else. They claim Eastern cattle'll starve to death in winter time if you turn 'em loose out west. Mexico dogies, they say, have been used to it for two hundred years. They're like mountain goats, and can paw their feed out o' snow."

Elkins raised his eyebrows. "And what's your answer to that, Cameron?"

"I say good stock'll get fatter'n cheap stock. Good stock moves slower, so it doesn't run off its fat like dogies do. Dogies are nervous. They're built for speed, not for feedin'. A good cow'll keep her fat longer'n a dogie, and so she has a better chance gettin' through a winter."

The banker pushed a box of cigars toward Johnny. "I can see you know cattle, Cameron. I agree with you, on account of an incident that happened seven years ago in western Nebraska."

"What was that?"

"In the fall of '66 an ox team was heading toward Oregon," Elkins said. "A heavy snow made the drivers abandon it in western Nebraska. They turned the oxen loose, cached the wagon and returned to Missouri on horseback. Next spring they went back to get the cached wagon. They expected to find only the bleached skeletons of the oxen, but found instead the animals themselves, sleek, fat and ready for the block. Why? Because those oxen were good feeders. They weren't Herefords, of course, but they were stall-fed Eastern cattle that had learned how to eat.

JOHNNY went out and put up his horse for the night. Then he took a room at La Fonda Tavern.

After supper he was getting ready for bed when a mozo brought him a note. It was on stationery of a gambling resort called El Silverado, and was signed by its proprietress, Doña Marta Calaveras.

We have an interest in common, señor. Will you please come to see me?

It might be a trap. Johnny felt like giving it a wide berth. Montoya could easily be back of it.

Johnny strolled out to the lobby desk. "Is Don Ramon Montoya in town?" he asked the clerk.

"No, señor. When in Santa Fe, Don Ramon always stops here. But since the fiesta we have not seen him."

"What about this gambling joint, El Silverado?"

"One is safe to go there, señor. Our best people may be found at Doña Marta's."

Johnny took a stroll down the street. He was curious. Maybe he was being lured to a gambling house where Montoya had posted an assassin to pick him off. Or maybe

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Montoya didn't figure in it at all. A rumor might be abroad that Johnny Cameron was a cowman who had just been loaned fifteen thousand dollars. In that case any gambling house would want him as a customer.

The Silverado was on lower San Francisco. Johnny saw a carriage drive up to discharge an elderly caballero. This gentleman entered the Silverado, and others who turned in there seemed eminently respectable. Looking in, Johnny saw a long bar and rows of gaming tables. A Spanish girl was dancing on a stage at one end. Other girls were serving drinks at the games. Johnny saw only two Americans. All other patrons seemed to be native New Mexicans of the ruling class.

Confident now that Doña Marta wanted only his money, and quite sure she wouldn't get it, Johnny stepped inside. At the bar he inquired for the proprietress.

A swarthy, one-eyed bartender answered him. "She is in her office at the rear, señor."

JOHNNY went back to a door marked *"Oficina,"* and entered. He found himself in a room furnished with an imported rug, cushioned chairs, a mahogany desk and a steel safe. Seated at the desk was a bejeweled woman with plump cheeks and flashing eyes. She must have been a charmer ten years ago. Even now only a double chin kept her from being more than commonly attractive.

"I'm Cameron," Johnny introduced himself.

Her smile flashed. "You are welcome, señor. You will sit down, please?" She pushed a jar of cigarettes toward him, lighting one herself. "And now, if you will excuse me only a minute, señor?"

La Marta finished counting a stack

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of money on the desk before her. Then she carried it to the safe and locked the safe.

"I got your note," Johnny said. "What's the idea?"

She sat down and her brilliantly mascaraed eyes appraised him boldly. "You have been a guest of the Sandovals, have you not?" she asked.

"That's right."

"Don Ygnacio is a so charming caballero, no? Do you like him?"

"Who wouldn't?"

Marta arched a teasing eyebrow. "And you like the Señorita Josefita?"

"I'd be blind and dumb if I didn't," Johnny admitted.

"And she likes you, too, señor."

Johnny reddened. He was more annoyed than embarrassed, though.

Before he could protest, La Marta leaned forward to continue: "I know, because I saw her with you at the fiesta. There is a sigh in her eyes, señor, and it is not for Ramon Montoya."

Johnny stood up stiffly. "You've got no call to talk like that, ma'am."

"Please do not be offended, señor. We speak disrespect to no one. And because we both wish the same thing, we should be friends."

"What same thing?"

"You wish that Ramon Montoya does not marry the little Sandoval. Is it not so, señor?"

"I reckon it is," Johnny conceded.

"And so do I, señor."

Johnny sat down again. The woman's intensity gave him the answer. She was in love with Montoya. For no other reason could she oppose with such bold directness his marriage to Josefita.

"There's nothing we can do about it," Johnny said.

"I can do nothing, señor. But *you* can do much."

"What, for instance?"

"You can make love to Josefita."

Johnny flushed and again stood up. "I can mind my own business. And so can you, lady. I get your drift, though. You want me to cut Montoya out so you can rope him yourself. You're welcome to him. But leave me out of it. Don Ygnacio treated me white. He took me right into his house. He gave me a fine bronc. I'll put the skids under Montoya, if I can, but not by—"

Marta broke in with a sigh. "It is the only way, señor."

"There's a better way," Johnny said. "All I need's to get the deadwood on Montoya. I can show him up as a double-cinched *ladrón*. A back-alley killer, that's what he is. The number-one, horse-stealin' dry-gulcher of the *pozo hondo*."

La Marta Calaveras gasped. Then she stood up with her eyes blazing. She was like an outraged Juno. "What? You insult my *querido* Ramon?" Her indignation took the pitch of hysteria.

Suddenly she snatched a pistol from the desk. "He is not a *ladrón*," she asserted. "He is a fine caballero. The best caballero in all New Mexico. You will please get out of here, señor, before I shoot bullets through your head."

CHAPTER XIII

WEST OF THE PECOS

RIDING toward the Pecos next day, Johnny considered ruefully his none-too-graceful retreat from Marta Calaveras' office. "She's sure gone on that buzzard," he confided to Muchacho. "I'd ought to've known better'n to talk him down that way. It just shows what I'd get myself into if I talked the same way before the Sandovals."

It was a clear morning with a touch of frost in the air. After top-

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ping the piñon pass at Glorietta, Johnny headed down into the Pecos watershed and soon found himself in open country. No good ambush for a sniper here, and so he had plenty of time to think. It was clear that La Marta was an old flame of Montoyas, and that she was far from ready to give him up.

Still, Montoya had fooled her as completely as he had fooled the others. And La Marta, as the operator of a gambling palace, could be classed as a woman of the world. Certainly she was in a position to know all the undercover intrigues of Santa Fe.

If Montoya could deceive Marta, how much more easily could he deceive the Sandovals! "It's our job to show him up, Muchacho," Johnny muttered. "And we'll have to work fast."

About an hour before sundown, Johnny sighted cottonwoods. He knew they marked that headwater fork of the Pecos which crosses the Santa Fe Trail some thirty-five miles west of Las Vegas.

The ford was deserted, which disappointed Johnny a little. He had hoped to find his friends already here.

Dismounting on the east bank, he staked Muchacho out to graze. Then Johnny made a fire for supper. Coffee, beans and bacon were in his saddle roll.

Just as the coffee began to boil he saw dust eastward along the trail. Cattle. White-face cattle! They came nearer and Johnny gave a cheer.

"Hi-o, cowboys!" he yelled. Tossing the saddle on Muchacho, he went tearing down the road. "Hi, Ogallala! Hey there, Sweetwater! Who let you old buffalo skinners out o' jail?"

"Look 'em over, Johnny," yelled Ogallala.

"Whata yuh tryin' to do? Stampede 'em?" demanded Rosy Ryan. "Slap on the brakes, kid."

Johnny was still shouting and waving his hat. Greeting his old cronies, and appraising five hundred fancy heifers all in one breath was too much to be expected. He whirled to an exuberant halt, finally, at the wheel of a camp wagon driven by Sweetwater Smith.

"Yip-a-yai-yip-a-yah!" Johnny yelled.

Sweetwater slapped his whip at the tip of Johnny's nose.

"Toss a rope on him, Slim," advised Sweetwater. "Since we seen him last he's been feedin' on loco."

"Where'd yuh git that bronc, kid?" Slim Coxon was a horse lover and his eye beamed approval at Muchacho.

"Is this here the Pecos?" Ogallala demanded. "In that case load up yer guns, cowboys. I hearn they ain't no law tother side of it."

They were all at the wagon now, letting the heifers drift on. Johnny tried to ask fifty questions at once and answer as many from his friends. "We sure made a sensation, Johnny," Rosy grinned. "Seems like the natives out here never seen any cow stuff like this before. We sure had 'em lined up battin' their eyes when we driv these ballies through Las Vegas."

"We driv slow," Ogallala stated, "so we wouldn't ga'nt 'em none."

"Let's push 'em on to water and quit gabbin'."

RIDING between Slim and Ogallala, Johnny trailed on after the cattle. It made him proud to look down the straight broad backs of those heifers. Five hundred of

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them, all two-coming-three years old. Blocky stock with chunky legs, short horns and low-hanging dewlaps. Glossy red cattle except for white at the face and tip of the tail. Dewlaps were white like satin, too, and sometimes the white carried back along curly manes to the shoulders.

Beef cattle. The vanguard of vast herds destined to displace dogies from the range.

"Look 'em over!" Slim exulted. "Even after bein' driv three hun'erd miles from Granada, you still can't see a rib. Betcha they'll weigh better'n eight hun'erd pounds a head right now."

"Notice how they walk to water, Johnny?" grinned Ogallala. "If they was Mexico stuff, they'd've started runnin' soon as they smelled a crick. These here stuff of ourn has sure got dignity, Johnny."

"You can't hardly push 'em out of a walk," Rosy boasted. "Soon as they stop walkin', they start feedin'. Soon as they stop feedin', they bed down. They ain't nervous, like them longhorns we usta drive north from Texas."

Ogallala took a bite of plug cut. "I recollect it allers usta take two hands to count them Texas cattle, Johnny. One to say 'Here they come,' and another to say 'There they go.' "

The cattle had arrived at the Pecos and were watering now. Johnny rode the bank to admire them. Among the five hundred heifers he counted ten yearling bulls.

Sweetwater pulled the wagon up beside Johnny's campfire. By the time Johnny returned from his inspection, bacon was sizzling in the pan. The coolish September twilight deepened.

"Come and grab it," yelled Sweetwater Smith.

"Them critters won't graze far," Ogallala opined. "Easiest stuff to handle I ever saw."

"What about these here outlaws you writ about, Johnny?" Slim questioned.

"The *pozo's* full of 'em, Slim." Around the supper fire, Johnny gave a brief sketch of his encounters with Montoya.

"But the rest of these crooks," he finished, "are all Americans. They're squattin' in the *pozo* right now, waitin' to throw lead."

Ogallala, rolling his tongue into a round, knobby cheek, said nothing. He was older than the others, a blizzard-chiseled little range man with the face of a starved owl. Johnny saw him put aside his coffee cup to begin polishing his Colt .45.

Slim Coxon got up and moved toward the horses. "I'll take a scout up crick," he said. His lean six feet disappeared in the gloom.

Sweetwater Smith called after him: "If yuh need any help, just holler." He went limping to the wagon for his bedroll. A Comanche bullet had once broken Sweetwater's leg. Less active than the others, he usually drove the wagon.

Rosy Ryan took a comb from his vest and used it on his sleek, reddish hair. The vest was braided and his shirt was the finest silk. Rosy was a heartbreaker and knew it. He had two hobbies, fancy clothes and guns.

"A tough outfit, huh?" Rosy said. "Then I guess I made a good investment. Take a look in the wagon, Johnny."

"Rosy blowed himself," Ogallala explained. "He loosened up and brought everybody a present. He figgered we might need 'em."

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JOHNNY went to the wagon. In the bed of it lay a brand-new rifle. "It ain't never been fired, Johnny," Rosy said. "And it's all yourn."

"But I already got a rifle," Johnny told him.

"Throw it away. It's out o' date now."

Knowing Rosy to be a crank on firearms, Johnny picked up the rifle hopefully. It was a model he had never seen before.

"Smack bang out o' the factory," Rosy declared. "I bought one fer each of us and they're the first centerfire Winchesters that ever hit this range."

Centerfire! The significance of it impressed Johnny. He had never before heard of a centerfire repeating rifle. His old rifle, of course, was the 1866 model rimfire .44.

"This here's what they call the .44-40," Rosy explained. "Shoots twice as far and four times as accurate. So bring on your *pozo* renegades."

Johnny was elated. "If I'd only had this baby back of those rocks that day they four-timed me!"

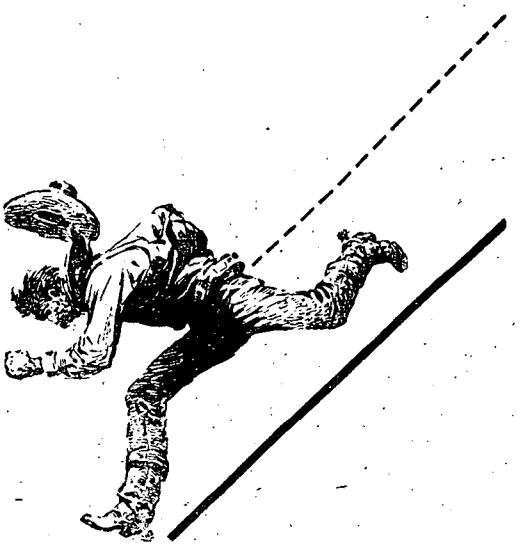
"Means we're heeled fer 'em now," Ogallala chuckled. "First time they come moseyin' around our cow stuff we'll blast daylight through 'em and then feed 'em to the buzzards."

The wagon team had been unhitched and was eating grain from a box on the ground. All the riding horses had been unsaddled except Slim's. Johnny went to his own saddle and put the new .44-40 in the scabbard there, tossing the old rimfire into the wagon.

Then Slim's beanpole silhouette rode out of the darkness. "Stuff's all right," he announced. "Nobody seems to be hangin' around."

Ogallala cocked an owlish eyebrow. "I figger them outlaws won't bother us none, Slim, till we get to the *pozo*."

BANDIDO BULLETS WHINE



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WILD WEST

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

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"A feller never can tell," said Slim.

"I'll go out on night herd," Johnny offered. "You jiggers get some sleep."

"Call me at midnight," said Sweetwater, "and I'll relieve you."

"Sure." Johnny saddled Muchacho and rode into the cottonwoods.

Fording the stream, he found the heifers scattered along the west bank. Most of them had bedded down for the night. Johnny rode to the summit of a low hill and dismounted. There, after staking out Muchacho at the end of a long rope, he sat down with his rifle to watch.

Coyotes barked up river and an owl hooted from the cottonwoods. The glow of the fire on the far bank grew dim. The boys would be pretty tired after the long drive from rails. Johnny decided to let them sleep.

So at midnight he did not arouse Sweetwater, but kept a lone vigil all night on the hill. When dawn came it was a thrill to see the heifers grazing in the valley there, like fluffy balls of red and white.

Twenty-five thousand dollars on the hoof. "They'll make prime bait for those outlaws," Johnny thought. He rode back to camp and aroused his friends.

By sunup they were on the trail to Santa Fe.

"If that *pozo* grass is so good," Rosy inquired as they rode along, "how come somebody else ain't already filed on it?"

"Because honest folks are scared of the outlaws there," Johnny said. "And the outlaws themselves dassent show up at a land office. And if they did file, outlaws never stay long enough in one place to prove up."

Rosy nodded. "I savvy. It takes three years to prove up a claim. A feller's got to build a house on it, ain't he?"

"That's right."

"Look, Johnny. Why didn't you file claims fer all five of us, just to make sure nobody beats us to 'em?"

"The homestead law," Johnny explained, "makes each claimant swear he's seen the land he's filin' on. But nobody'll get ahead of us. We'll turn the heifers loose on the Sandoval grant. Then we'll ride into the *pozo* with our guns limber and stand on those five waterholes. Then we fill out the blanks and let one man hightail with 'em to the land office."

THAT same morning Ramon Montoya rode into the *pozo hondo*. He was followed by five sleepy-eyed peons. Each peon rode a burro. Montoya guided them to a spring of water which bubbled from the bed of an arroyo, giving a flow about the size of a man's leg. The flow ran about half a mile before disappearing in the gravel.

"This will be your rancho, José," Montoya announced.

One of the burro-mounted Mexicans looked at him with a dumb smile. He did not fully understand this errand. All he knew was that Don Ramon had just given him fifty dollars, which to José Arragon was a fortune. He was a very poor man and his family did not have frijoles for the winter.

"*Bueno*, Don Ramon," he said gratefully.

"Sign this paper, José."

Although painfully illiterate, José Arragon managed to scratch his name on a homestead application blank. He signed it in duplicate. Montoya put one copy in his pocket. He put the other copy in a tin can. Then he drove a stake in the

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ground by the spring and inverted the can over it.

"Let us move on to the next waterhole, *niños*," said Montoya.

Riding north across the *pozo's* basin, he explained that only at five places was water to be found here in the dry season. When snow was melting, water could be found anywhere. But after July fifteenth, stock in the *pozo* would need to water on one of five quarter sections. "So whoever controls the five waterholes, my *niños*, will control all of the *pozo*."

"And what must we do, patron?"

"Nothing. You go home to Santa Fe and spend your fifty dollars. I will build an adobe hut on each of the claims to comply with law. At the end of three years, the government will give you title to the claims. You will transfer the titles to me. Then I will give each of you another fifty pesos. Understand?"

They comprehended only that Don Ramon was a caballero and should be obeyed. And was not this a very easy way for each of them to earn a hundred dollars? They were not *ladrónes*. They had never heard of Fadeaway Fallon. They were just ignorant *pobres* from the back alleys of Santa Fe, and years ago they had been servants in the great house of the Montoyas on Agua Frio Road. Why should they deny their old master such a simple service?

WHEN all five claims were filed, Montoya told them to be on their way. "You will say nothing about this, *niños*. I myself will mail the duplicate applications to the land office."

The pawns disappeared up a timbered slope toward Santa Fe. A few minutes later Montoya saw Fadeaway Fallon riding toward him.

The outlaw reined up truculently. "What's the idea, Ramon? Who you bringin' in here, anyway?"

"They are only ignorant peons, señor." Montoya gave a sly smile. "*Innocentes* who have loaned me their names."

Fallon scowled at a claim stake. "Been usin' 'em to file land, huh?"

"And why not? Now for three years you are sure to have no intrusion in the *pozo*."

The argument weighed with Fallon. Still, he had planned on letting the *pozo* be a web in which he could catch twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of cattle. "Things ain't broke right lately, Ramon," he complained. "We need to cash in on them cows. Did you hear about Billy Clegg?"

"No, señor. What about him?" Billy Clegg's murderer blew cool smoke from his cigarette.

"He skipped out, blast him, with whatever he grabbed off Martinez."

"*Verdad?* It is too bad, señor." Montoya hid a smile. It was with cash from the Martinez purse that he had just paid off the five peons.

"So I need to pick off those cows o' Cameron's," Fadeaway insisted. "Why can't you lay off filin' these claims till we get 'em in here?"

"They are sure to come anyway," Montoya argued. "At least they will come as far as the Sandoval rancho. You can raid them there. Then you will have the cattle and I will have the *pozo*."

"Yeah?" Fallon's lip curled. "You allers figger to git yourn without any fightin', I notice."

Montoya's eyes narrowed and his lips puckered to blow smoke rings. "If you do as I suggest you will not need to fight, señor."

Fadeaway hooked a leg over his saddlehorn. "I'm listenin'." He had a good deal of respect for Montoya's cunning. "Show me how I

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can run off them cows without a fight and I'll take off my hat to you, Ramon."

"It is very simple, señor. Five men will bring the catle to the Sandoval grant. They will camp on the Puerco at this end, so that they will not disturb the sheep. And the next day they will ride over the mountain to file claims here in the *pozo*. Yes?"

"Yeah, we can count on it that far," agreed Fallon.

"There is a gap they must ride through on top of the divide, before they come down into the *pozo*. You will hide your best shot in the gap. He is Frenchy Welsh, you have said. With a rifle, Frenchy will shoot Cameron. The others will chase Frenchy, who must have a fast horse. While they chase Frenchy for many miles toward Colorado, you are down at the Sandoval rancho driving cattle across the Puerco toward Arizona. So there is no danger for anyone but Frenchy."

"Frenchy's no fool," Fallon protested. "He won't do it. Why should he take all the risk just because you an' me got a grudge agin' Cameron?"

"This is the reason." Montoya produced a purse. It was the purse which Billy Clegg had taken from Martinez. From it Montoya boldly drew out one thousand dollars in bills. He handed the money to Fallon.

"One thousand pesos is a big reason, señor. It is Frenchy's if he takes the risk. He has taken bigger risks for less, no?"

Fallon thumbed through the bills, then looked up with suspicion. "Thought you was busted, Ramon."

"Last night I have won this money," Montoya asserted, "at roulette."

The explanation satisfied Fallon. "Aw right," he agreed. "Frenchy gets a thousand fer knocking over Cameron. And while Cameron's pals chase him north, we drive the cow stuff west. You allers did have a head on you, Ramon."

CHAPTER XIV

CONQUEST OF SANTA FE

MAKING dust and history, up the Santa Fe Trail came a drove of Hereford heifers. At villages along the route, brown faces stared dubiously from doorways. In all New Mexico, cattle like these had never been seen before.

"Que bonitos!" What pretty cows! But weren't they being driven in the wrong direction? Heretofore, cattle had always been driven from and not toward the ranges of the Rio Grande. The markets lay east, not west. This was taking coals to Newcastle.

"But *mira*, Manuel! These *vacas* are not like our own. Let us follow and learn where they go."

Vaqueros from the ranchos and village boys on fuzzy-eared burros rode out to greet the drovers and to inspect these blocky, deep-dewlapped bovines. Some of them galloped ahead to tell neighbors not to miss the sight.

So by the time Johnny Cameron and his friends came to a rise from which they could look down upon Santa Fe, an entourage of outriders had joined them. Where did these cows come from? To what rancho were they being taken? Why weren't they branded? Do you need any help, señores?

All of which made Johnny more and more proud of an idea. His idea was in the flesh now, a wave of red-and-white life rolling into Santa Fe.

They turned into the Camino

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Real and the heifers moved along the same route of parade trod only three weeks ago by Don Diego de Vargas. Now, as then, an applauding crowd lined either edge of the road.

"Get along, little ballies." There was a lilt in Johnny's voice. He flicked his rope at a straggler.

"Better help Slim ride point," Ogallala said, "and clear the way. Somebody might get run over."

Johnny spurred down the long red-and-white line to the front and joined Slim there. And still curious crowds lined the highway ahead of them. "If these were longhorns," Slim said, "they'd be stampeded by now."

Even these Herefords weren't entirely proof against contagion from excitement. As the chatter on either side arose in volume, the heifers began lowing, looking with half-startled eyes to the right and left. "We'll make it through, though," Johnny said. "Look, Slim; that's the plaza right where you see that picket fence around the *alamos*."

The point moved into the plaza, swinging west at the palace of the governors. Half of Santa Fe was on the plaza. All the guests of La Fonda Tavern tumbled out. Johnny saw Stephen Elkins and his customers emerge from the bank.

"How you like 'em?" Johnny yelled.

Elkins' broad smile proved that he did not regret loaning money on these cattle. Johnny let Slim point the herd while he himself rode up to the bank steps.

A GROUP of prominent citizens stood with Elkins. One of them owned feeding corrals just west of the city. He invited Johnny to hold the herd there overnight.

"A good idea," Elkins put in. "Thank you very much, Don Pablo."

He presented Johnny to Don

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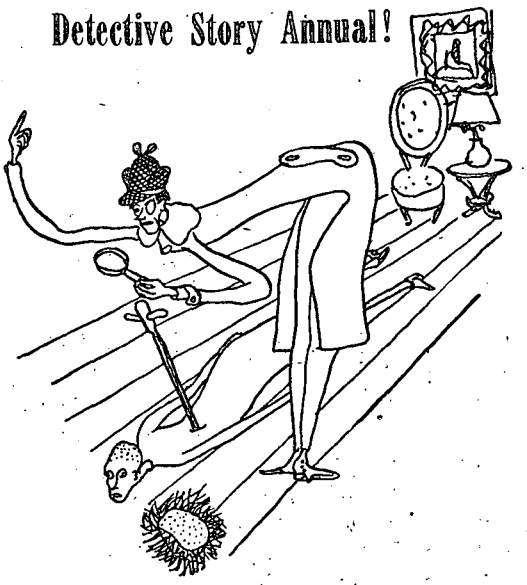

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Pablo Lucero, explaining that Don Pablo was one of the more progressive stockmen of New Mexico.

"It is nothing," murmured Don Pablo. "And perhaps we may do some business, Señor Cameron. Don Stephano has told me that you paid fifty dollars each for these cows."

"That's right, sir," Johnny said.

"I will give you sixty, señor." Don Pablo brought out a check book.

Elkins smiled. He explained to Johnny: "Don Pablo has a large Spanish grant stocked with longhorns. And now he sees a chance to improve the blood of his cattle."

"No, thanks." Johnny refused Don Pablo's offer with a smile.

"Sixty-five, señor."

"They're not for sale," Johnny told him.

The cows had drifted by now, with Ogallala and Rosy flicking ropes at the stragglers. Last of all, Sweetwater Smith came rumbling along in his wagon.

"Pull over, Sweetwater," Johnny yelled. "Want you to meet some friends."

He presented Sweetwater to Elkins and Don Pablo.

"Some parade, huh?" Sweetwater grinned.

"Reminds me of the one three weeks ago," Johnny said, "when De Vargas rode in on a white stallion."

"Yes," Stephen Elkins said thoughtfully, "except that this parade is more significant for New Mexico. The other one looked backward, this one looks forward. Forward to the day when millions of these English cattle will feed on the Western plains."

Don Pablo hurried to find his horse. He promised to overtake them at his corrals.

"I'll show up there, too, Cameron," Elkins said. "Got some papers I want you boys to sign."

Johnny rode on. Just beyond the Silverado gambling place on lower San Francisco Street, he caught up with the cattle. A score of volunteer outriders were still with them; one and all they offered to show the way to Don Pablo's corrals.

"May we help you brand them, señores?" several of them asked.

Ogallala grinned. "Looks like help's cheap out this way, Johnny."

"These New Mexicans," Johnny said, "will give you the shirt off their back. Fact is, they embarrass you. Which reminds me I can't figure out what to do about Don Ygnacio Sandoval."

"He's the gent what give you that chestnut bronc?"

"Yeah, and he's gonna let us use his grass till we get settled in the *pozo*. Won't take pay. If you offer to pay him, he's insulted."

"Looks like we'd orter make him a present," Ogallala suggested.

"Yeah, but what? We better get some advice from Elkins on that."

About six miles west of town they came to ranch buildings and corrals beside the road. In the corrals were troughs with water piped into them, and feeding racks.

Here Don Pablo Lucero caught up with them. "Enter, señores," he invited.

The heifers were driven into the corrals. Johnny saw vega hay stacked on the roof of an out shed and offered to buy two loads of it. Lucero agreed and gave orders for it to be put in the corral racks.

IN an adjoining paddock Johnny noticed a handsome white stallion. He recognized it as the one Ramon Montoya had ridden in the fiesta. Then he remembered hearing that Montoya had borrowed the

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animal for the occasion from a wealthy stockman. Evidently the stockman was Don Pablo Lucero.

Sweetwater pulled up and they made camp by a spring across the road. It was still only midafternoon, but a few hours' extra rest would be good for the stock.

"Here comes your banker friend," Sweetwater said.

Stephen Elkins rode up with a note and a chattel mortgage. Johnny Cameron had already signed them. Now Ogallala, Slim, Sweetwater and Rosy added their signatures.

"The bank," Elkins said, "insists on one condition."

"Anything you say," Johnny agreed.

"It's that you brand these cattle before you turn 'em out on the range."

"We'd be loco not to," said Rosy.

"We aim to brand 'em in the Sandoval corrals soon as we get there," explained Johnny. "Which reminds me haven't registered a brand yet."

"Pick a brand," Elkins suggested, "and I'll register it for you myself."

"What about Diamond Cross?" Rosy asked.

"I like Bar Slash better," Sweetwater said. "Only takes two licks with a straight iron."

"Too easy to blot," objected Ogallala.

"Let's pick a brand that means something," Johnny said thoughtfully.

"What, for instance?"

"We'll figure one out. But first, let's rustle some land-claim filin' blanks so we can file on those *pozo* claims."

"I brought along a pad of homestead blanks," Elkins said. He handed the pad to Johnny.

"Thanks. And now one other thing," Johnny said. "I don't want to roll up to Don Ygnacio's place empty-handed. I mean we got to take him a present."

"A gold watch," Rosy suggested.

"Too much like handin' him money," Johnny argued. "It ought to be something casual—and something he needs. Just like the horse he gave me when Blazer got shot. There I was without a bronc, so it was the most natural thing in the world for him to gimme one."

"It's a delicate problem," Elkins murmured. "These New Mexico aristocrats don't like to be paid for hospitality. They're very sensitive. Whatever you give Don Ygnacio, you must make it look like you're doing yourselves a favor and not him."

"Which hands me an idea," Johnny said. "We're gonna brand these Herefords in the Sandoval corrals."

"I getcha," Slim said. "We put Sandoval's brand on a few of 'em by mistake."

"Nothin' so crude as that. Listen. Usual way to brand a cow is to rope her, throw her, hogtie her and then brand."

They gaped at him. "What other way is they?" Ogallala wondered.

"I saw it at the Kaycee stockyards," said Johnny. "You make a brandin' chute in the corral. It's a contraption kind o' like a hinged gate, with a squeeze lever. You drive a cow down an aisle that gets narrower until it comes to the squeeze gate. Then you squeeze and pinion the cow, upright on her feet, so she can't move, and you slap on the brand."

OGALLALA didn't like it. Neither did Sweetwater Smith. "Too ladylike," Sweetwater objected. "That ain't no he-man way to handle cattle."

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"It's an intelligent way," argued Johnny. "Especially if you're brandin' comin' three-year-old heifers likely to have calves in the spring. Look. You throw a cow and drag her and bully her and let her lie there bawlin' while you romp on her with hogties and a brandin' iron. And what happens?"

"It don't hurt her none," Sweetwater insisted. "First thing you know you'll have us feedin' these critters with a spoon, Johnny."

"What really happens," Johnny said, "is that the cow loses at least ten pounds in flesh by bein' thrown. Five hundred cows'd lose five thousand pounds. We just turned down eight cents a pound for these Herefords. We throw 'em to brand and we lose four hundred dollars' worth of beef. But we can build a stand-up chute for one hundred dollars. We save three hundred. Then we ride off and leave the chute there, casuallike. It's our gift to Don Ygnacio Sandoval."

Sweetwater tried to pick a hole in the plan, but couldn't. Ogallala admitted grudgingly that it wasn't a bad idea.

But Stephen Elkins was tremendously impressed. "Cameron," he said, "it's a fine thing to bring in new cattle. But it's an even better thing to bring in new methods of handling them."

Rosy Ryan brushed back his red hair and grinned. "And what about new guns, Mr. Elkins? We brung them along, too. Look." He went to his saddle and took his late-model Winchester. "It shoots centerfire ca'tridges," Rosy explained with pride.

"What advantage is that?" Elkins asked.

While Rosy was expounding the superior ballistics of any centerfire weapon over the old rimfire rifles, Johnny looked west down the trail and saw a rider approaching. The man was on a calico pony. As he came nearer Johnny could see that he was Ramon Montoya.

Evidently Montoya was on the way from his mine to Santa Fe. His route would take him by the roadside group here, where courtesy would demand that he stop and exchange greetings.

"I just picked out that brand we were puzzlin' over," Johnny said suddenly. "I thought of one that means something."

"Which is what?" demanded Slim.

Johnny held his answer, timing it for the arrival of Montoya. In the meantime he looked about for a target on which Rosy could demonstrate his new rifle.

Atop of a cottonwood snag about two hundred yards away, Johnny saw a chicken hawk. He pointed. "Take a pot at that hawk, Rosy," he suggested.

Everyone looked at the hawk. "It's too long a shot," Elkins said, "for any man's rifle."

"You'd never hit it with a rimfire," Rosy admitted. "But look at this." He stepped to the wagon wheel to use it for a rest.

"That's right," Johnny echoed. "Even Bill Hickok himself couldn't hit that bird with a rimfire. But watch what a centerfire does. My money's on you, Rosy."

At that moment Ramon Montoya drew up beside them. "*Buenos dias*, Don Stephano," he greeted. "And you, Señor Cameron."

Rosy was drawing a bead on the hawk. Johnny held his breath. Rosy was the best shot of them all, but even he might miss a test like this.

The rifle cracked. The hawk spread its wings, wabbled on the

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snag, then fell flapping to the ground.

"Amazing!" exclaimed Elkins

"Which gives us a brand for these heifers," Johnny said. "We brand 'em Circle Dot."

"A circle with a dot in the middle, huh?" echoed Ogallala.

"Sure," said Johnny. "Like the shell cap o' that ca'tridge Rosy just fired. We slap it on these cows of ours. Then every time a rustler starts to steal one he sees that brand and it reminds him how straight a centerfire rifle can shoot. Don't you think that's a good idea, Don Ramon?"

Montoya's eyes flickered as they met Johnny's. His response was a faint shrug. Then, lighting a cigarette, he rode on toward Santa Fe.

CHAPTER XV

OUTLAW PARLEY

IF fear pricked at the spine of Montoya as he loped on up the road, it wasn't fear of bullets. What frightened him was a feeling that Johnny Cameron would in the end uncover proof of his crimes and expose him to the Sandovals.

It made Montoya impatient. Impatient for the hour when Frenchy was due to snipe Cameron at the gateway gap of the *pozo*. When would that be? Not tomorrow, for it would take those Americans at least two days to get those cows over the mesa to the Sandoval rancho. Then they'd be riding to file in the *pozo*.

A smile straightened Montoya's lips. They'd be too late to file. The claims were already taken. Which reminded him that the duplicate applications were in his pocket now, ready for delivery to the land office. Attending to that was one purpose of this trip to Santa Fe. Another was to put himself far from a scene of ambush, and so have a perfect alibi for Cameron's murder.

Also there were minor errands. With what little remained of the Martinez money, Montoya must in some small degree appease his creditors.

Dismounting in front of La Fonda Tavern, he tossed his bridle reins to a boy there. "Take him to the livery, *niño*." He gave the boy a dollar.

At the tavern desk Montoya insured his welcome by paying half of the several hundred dollars he was in arrears there. "I shall settle the rest soon," he promised. "Give me the same room."

He was taken to a suite at the rear side of the patio, on the ground floor. There was a bedroom and a small sala, with a private entrance to a street. Upon occasion Montoya received visitors whose approach through the main lobby and patio might be embarrassing. It was in these very rooms that he had arranged for Pancho Archuleta to spy on Cameron.

Now he groomed himself and went out to the plaza. His first call was at the bank where a vice president looked up hopefully. "We've been expecting you, Don Ramon."

"Here is one half the due interest, señor." Montoya presented five hundred dollars.

The bank officer's smile faded. "What about the principal? Your notes for—"

"I will tend to them soon, señor," Montoya cut in. He tossed the money on the desk and sauntered out.

AT his tailor's, Montoya paid a trifle on a long-standing account. Proceeding then to various other tradesmen, he paid them just

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enough to keep them quiet for a while. His last call was at a large trading store specializing in general supplies for ranches and mines.

He was appeasing the proprietor when a horseman drew up in front. The rider dismounted and came in. With a start Montoya saw that he was the dudish, red-haired cowboy who had given a demonstration of shooting down by Don Pablo's corrals below town.

The merchant turned politely to the newcomer. "May I serve you, señor?"

"If you ain't too busy," Rosy said. He presented a list of merchandise. "It's some heavy hinges and bolts and chains and a pulley, mister. Also we want eight two-by-ten planks twelve foot long. I reckon we can cut posts and poles to make the rest of it with. This here stuff's to build a brandin' chute with."

"Ah! I remember you rode by this afternoon with those so beautiful cows. You are a customer of Don Stephano Elkins, are you not? Then I am proud to make you my own. Shall I charge this, señor?"

"Much obliged," Rosy said. "And if you don't mind, deliver the stuff to our wagon down the road. We're campin' tonight at Don Pablo's corrals."

"It shall be done, señor."

Rosy Ryan went out. Montoya saw him ride on toward the plaza.

Returning to the hotel, Montoya saw the redhead again. He was stabling his horse at a livery barn. Having accomplished his errand in town, it was only natural that Rosy should want to spend the evening taking in the bright lights of Santa Fe.

Ramon Montoya resolved to keep well out of his way. A bullet from Frenchy's rifle would take care of Johnny Cameron. And Cameron's friends didn't greatly matter, since they could have no firsthand knowledge of the guilty person.

Back in his suite at the Fonda, Montoya looked ruefully at his purse. It was quite flat now. He had reserved just enough to pay five filing fees on as many claims in the *pozo*. He now put the fees in five envelopes, also inclosing in each the proper application. His own name did not appear on them at all. Stamping the envelopes he addressed them to the land office and dropped them in the mailbox.

That done, he went into the patio and dined. Nothing to do now except to keep conspicuously in Santa Fe while Frenchy ambushed Cameron, and while the rest of Fadeaway Fallon's gang made their raid on the cattle.

"Send a bottle of claret to my rooms, mozo," Montoya ordered. He retired to his suite and was sipping wine there when he heard a knock. Someone was at the private entrance giving to a dark side street.

It might be a creditor. So Montoya peered cautiously from a window. Yes, it was a saddler to whom he owed an old bill. Evidently the fellow had heard he was in town paying a few accounts. Now the rest of his creditors would be after him like a wolf pack. Montoya did not open the door. When the man had gone away he turned the key in the lock.

Three more glasses of wine made Montoya heady. Then came the sound of carriage wheels on the side street. They stopped at the curb. Again came a knock. Again Montoya peered discreetly from his window. This time he saw a woman. She was plump, middle-aged, and her face was almost hidden by a long, black mantilla.

La Marta Calaveras! Evidently

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she had heard of Ramon's arrival in Santa Fe.

Montoya kept quiet while she knocked three times. Then the carriage wheels creaked away and he gave a sigh of relief.

Marta, he admitted, was a problem. He considered it broodingly over more wine. How does one handle such an affair? She knew nothing of his connection with the *pozo* gang. She knew him only as a fine caballero. And she was tenaciously in love with him.

Until recently Montoya had kept her on a string, in case anything went wrong in his arrangement with Josefita Sandoval. It was now time to break off. He could do that only by keeping out of Marta's way.

AS he was brushing Marta from his mind, Ramon Montoya heard another step outside. A furtive step this time. Then a knock at his door.

Peering out, he saw a man dressed in shabby range garb. The man had bowed legs and a bullet head. Montoya recognized him as one of the *pozo* gang. Frenchy Welsh! Here was the killer who was to deal with Johnny Cameron. He had been selected because he was the best shot and owned the fastest horse.

It was a risk for Frenchy to appear in Santa Fe! Only something important could have brought him here.

Montoya opened the door and Frenchy slipped shiftily in.

"It ain't enough," the man said abruptly. His narrow, bloodshot eyes fixed sullenly on Montoya.

"What's not enough?" Montoya asked coldly.

"A thousand pesos. Too much risk fer chicken feed like that. You expect me to salivate that Cameron kid and then run a hoss race with four of his pals."

"I thought you had nerve," Montoya jeered.

"I got nerve if the ante's big enough. This time it ain't. You got to hike the ante, Ramon."

Montoya winced. It always stung him to have one of these backwash outlaws address him as an equal.

"How much do you want?"

"I'll take a chance fer five thousand," Frenchy said.

"I haven't that much," admitted Montoya.

"Aw right. Then pick yourself another sniper."

Frenchy was edging toward the exit when Montoya called him back. "Help yourself to wine, Frenchy, and we'll talk it over."

The outlaw poured himself some claret and sat down.

"I haven't any more," Montoya said. "But I can tell you how to take some of the risk out of this affair."

Frenchy looked at him suspiciously. "I notice you ain't takin' none yerself. You're holed up fer an alibi in Santa Fe, leavin' me to run a race with slugs."

"Some bullets go straighter than others," Montoya said. He told about Rosy Ryan shooting a hawk at two hundred yards. "He has a new kind of rifle, Frenchy. It's better than yours because it shoots centerfire bullets."

"Just like my .45?"

"Just like your .45. Only it's a rifle. With it you could not miss Cameron. Also you would have an advantage when they chase you."

Frenchy was interested. "Where is this rifle?"

"It's in a saddle scabbard at the Gomez livery barn. The man leaves his horse there while he takes in the sights tonight, here in Santa Fe. You

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can enter the barn by the rear and find the saddle on a rack there. Then you can exchange his rifle for your own. He will see only the stock sticking out of the scabbard, and so will not suspect the exchange until morning. By then you are back in the *pozo*."

IT was an inducement, Frenchy admitted. "But a thousand pesos ain't enough. You got to jack up the ante, Ramon."

Montoya leaned forward and lowered his voice. "If I tell you where you can get twenty-five thousand, or perhaps even fifty thousand, this very night, will you do it?"

Frenchy stared. His tongue curled out to lick his lip. "Fer twenty-five thousand," he said, "I'd shoot up the plaza."

"*Bueno*. Then listen. You know the gambling sala of Doña Marta Calaveras, on San Francisco Street?"

"I tossed dice there once."

"The doña's office is at the rear of it. Back of that is the apartment where she lives. The apartment has a door to the side street. You will slip in there a little before midnight and hide."

Frenchy shook his head decisively. "It's out o' my line, Ramon. I ain't no hand to pick locks."

Montoya's smile was sly. "You don't have to. At one time the doña and I were—well, shall we say very good friends? She gave me a key to her house. This is the key."

Montoya gave a key to Frenchy. Still doubtful, Frenchy held it gingerly between his fingers.

"Always at midnight," Montoya explained, "the dealers take their money to La Marta. They leave her alone with it. Sh counts it, then puts it in her safe. When she does that tonight, you step out of your hiding. You hold her up, not only for what she has in hand, but for all there is in the safe."

The prospect brought a flush to Frenchy's face. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" he breathed huskily. "It don't sound bad, Ramon. With a haul like that we don't need to dry-gulch nobody fer a cow steal. You an' me could split an' say nothin' about it to Fallon."

A threat hard as flint came into Montoya's eyes. "No. You must deal with Cameron as arranged. We are not safe if Cameron lives. You and I will divide the money, *muy bien*, and we will say nothing about it to Fallon. But this tip and this key are your pay for dealing with Cameron."

"Aw right," Frenchy agreed sullenly.

"There's a Federal warrant out for you, Frenchy," Montoya reminded him warningly. "If you cross me on this, I will see that it is served. Do this exactly as I say. Whatever you take from La Marta tonight, leave half of it in the hollyhocks that grow at this end of Burro Alley. Then ride to the *pozo* and make ready to receive Cameron."

"I'll scout the lay," Frenchy promised. "If it looks safe, I might take it on."

Montoya's watch said eleven o'clock. "You should make the rifle trade first," he advised. "Then slip into La Marta's house at eleven thirty."

FRENCHY went out without committing himself. Montoya could only hope he'd go through with it.

He himself went into the tavern lobby and took a conspicuous position. Other patrons came by and he spoke to them all. A nervousness grew on him as midnight approached. To cover it, Montoya sat

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in at a poker game with a group of wool buyers.

The game lasted until one o'clock. It broke up when a late-homing guest rushed in with a sensational report.

"Have you heard?" he cried. "A *ladrón* has held up La Marta!"

The poker players stared. One of them asked: "You mean the woman who runs that gamblin' joint on Frisco Street?"

"*Si, señor*. He has hit her with a gun and she is dead."

Montoya got shakily to his feet. He didn't need to fake his shock. "Caramba!" he cried. "Always La Marta has been my good friend. Are you sure it is true, señor?"

"But of course, Don Ramon. Was I not at play there myself? The dealers say she has been robbed of thirty-eight thousand pesos."

Instantly Montoya mentally divided that sum by two. With half of it he would be rich again. He could even redeem the old Montoya mansion on Agua Frio Road.

For another hour he continued to make himself conspicuous about the tavern. His own alibi was perfect. No one could possibly suspect him. Nor was he greatly afraid that Frenchy would evade a division. Only by dividing with Montoya could Frenchy hold out on the *pozo* gang. It would be cheaper for Frenchy to give half to Montoya than to give more than half to Fadeaway Fallon.

At last Montoya retired to his suite and remained there until daybreak. Then he went out to a café for coffee. Returning toward the tavern, he made a point of passing by an end of Burro Alley. From a corner of his eye he saw a sack half hidden in hollyhocks there.

Montoya made sure that no one was looking. Quickly he slipped the sack under his coat. Arriving at his rooms, he counted the money. Nineteen thousand dollars! It meant that Frenchy had been afraid to cross him. They need say nothing about this to Fallon. But Frenchy would carry on at the *pozo*.

CHAPTER XVI

THE HACIENDA

"SNAKE Rosy out o' them blankets," Ogallala demanded. He was boiling coffee over a fire by the road. Beyond piñon hills to the east, dawn was just breaking.

"How late was yuh out last night, Rosy?" Slim jerked the covers from his red-headed friend. When Rosy rolled over and groaned, Sweetwater Smith threw a bucket of water in his face.

"I heard him ramble in about four a. m.," Sweetwater insisted. "He was all likkered up and whoopin' like a Piute. Roll him in that irrigation ditch, Johnny."

Rosy staggered to his feet, rubbing his eyes. "It's early yet," he grumbled. "Why can't you horned toads let a gent sleep?"

"Look at him!" scoffed Ogallala. "We send him to town fer some hardware and he stays out all night!"

"I was in camp before one o'clock," Rosy protested. He sat down to pull on his boots, then turned at the sound of hoofbeats from the direction of Santa Fe. "Who's that comin', Johnny?"

An enormous Mexican galloped up and reined to a halt by the fire. The man's face was triple-chinned and a cigarette drooped indolently from his lips. He was armed with both a rifle and a revolver. Johnny saw a sheriff's badge on his shirt.

"*Como estan?*" the newcomer greeted them.

"Howdy, sheriff," Johnny said.

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"Not lookin' for anybody this early, are you?"

"*Si, señor.* There has been a murder in Santa Fe."

"A killin', huh?" echoed Ogallala. "Anything we can do to help? Light and pour yerself some coffee. My name's Murphy. These here other broke-down hairpins is named Coxon, Ryan, Smith and Cameron."

The sheriff got ponderously to the ground and accepted coffee. "I call myself Gonzalez," he said. "Yes, señores, I am told by my friend Don Stephano Elkins that you camp all night by the road here. So I come to inquire if you have heard anyone ride by after midnight."

"Rosy here rid in about that time," Slim offered. "I didn't hear nobody else. Didn't throw down on anybody in town last night, didja Rosy?"

"I was plumb peaceful," Rosy insisted. "When and where did this killin' come off, sheriff?"

"It was at exactly midnight," Gonzalez said, "at a gambling place called El Silverado. A *ladrón* has held up the proprietress there and has taken away much money. He hit her with his gun and she is dead."

"You mean Marta Calaveras?", Johnny asked quickly.

"*Si, señor.* It is very sad. Her place is always orderly and has never given me trouble. Thirty-eight thousand pesos the man has taken. If we catch him, he will hang."

"One of the *pozo* gang, maybe," Johnny suggested.

GONZALEZ shrugged. "The *pozo hondo* is not in my county, señor. Sometimes I have ridden there with posses from Rio Arriba and Sandoval Counties, but it is no use. When we arrive, always no one is there."

"Well, nobody rid by here after midnight," Sweetwater said. "He'd 've woke me up, 'cause my bedroll was within ten feet o' the trail."

Gonzalez turned his lazy eyes upon Rosy. He appraised the redhead for a minute and then said: "It is all I wish to know, señores. *Gracias.*"

Rosy took a cup of coffee and sat down on his saddle. It was one of five saddles by the campfire. Rosy had no more than seated himself there when he exploded: "Hell's fire! Look!" The stock of a carbine showing from the saddle scabbard had caught Rosy's eye. Sight of it agitated him so violently that he spilled his coffee.

He snatched out the rifle. "It ain't mine!" he yelled. "I been robbed. Last night it was dark and I didn't notice. Look! It's an old-style rimfire."

"Shoot me if it ain't!" Slim exclaimed.

"Somebody switched saddle guns on me," raged Rosy. "It must've been at the livery barn." He made a run for the corral to get his horse.

"Where you goin'?" Ogallala demanded.

Rosy came back across the road with his horse. His face flamed redder than his hair. "I'm foggin' to town," he announced, "fer a showdown with that Montoya buzzard. It was him done it. Nobody else knew I had that new '73 model .44-40. Montoya seen me shoot a hawk with it yestiddy, and it's a cinch he wanted it fer hisself."

Sheriff Gonzalez stared in confusion. "What is this, señor? It cannot be Don Ramon Montoya. He is a very fine caballero."

"He's a very fine outlaw," Johnny Cameron cut in. "But I'll admit we can't prove it, sheriff."

Gonzalez stiffened. "I am afraid

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If they win ... only our dead are free

These are our enemies.

They have only one idea—to kill, and kill, and kill, until they conquer the world.

Then, by the whip, the sword and the gallows, they will rule.

No longer will you be free to speak or write your thoughts, to worship God in your own way.

Only our dead will be free. Only the host who will fall before the enemy will know peace.

Civilization will be set back a thousand years.

Make no mistake about it—you cannot think of this as other wars.

You cannot regard your foe this time simply as people with a wrong idea.

This time you win—or die. This time you get no second chance.

This time you free the world, or else you lose it.

Surely that is worth the best fight of your life

—worth anything that you can give or do.

Throughout the country there is increasing need for civilian war service. To enlist the help of every citizen, the Government has organized the Citizens Service Corps as part of local Defense Councils. If there is no Defense Council in your community, or if it has not set up a Service Corps, help to organize one. If one exists, cooperate with it in every possible way. Write this magazine for a free booklet telling you what to do and how to do it. Join the fight for Freedom—now!

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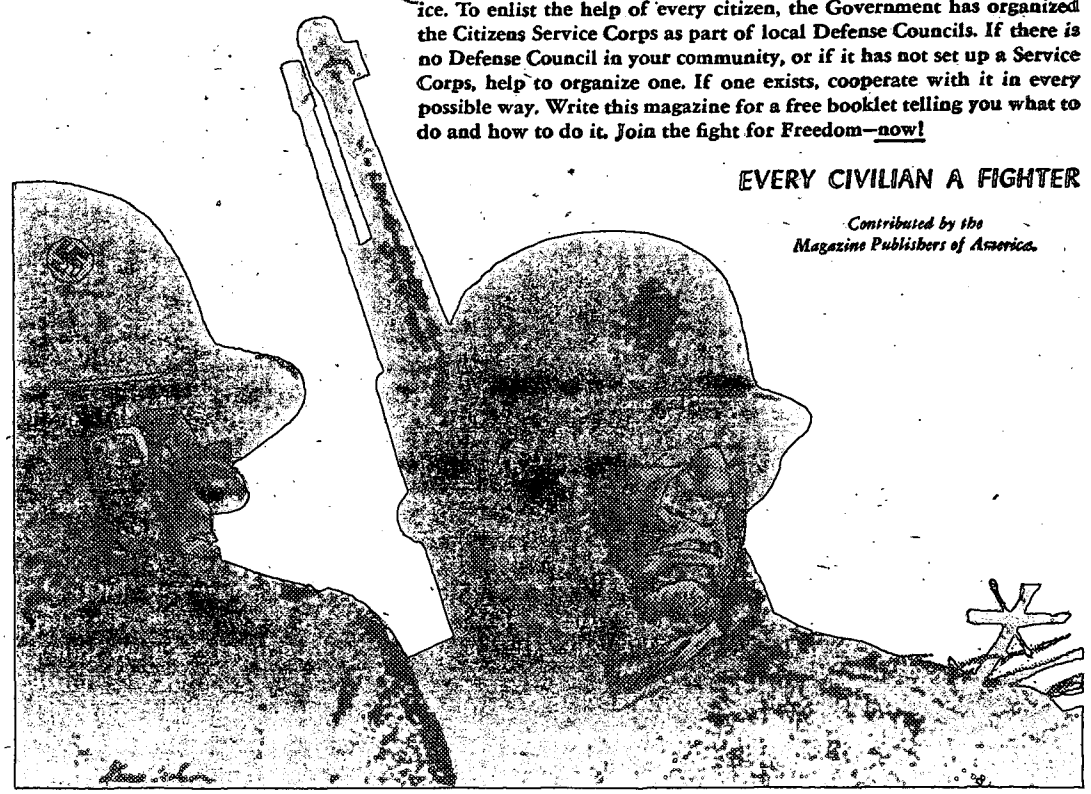

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Continued from page 148

you are mistake, señor." Evidently he didn't like to hear strangers cast aspersions on one of the old Santa Fe families.

"Let it pass," Johnny said. "Soon as we can corral some proof on Montoya, we'll let you know. And, Rosy, calm yourself down."

"You'd only get your carcass in jail, Rosy," Ogallala said.

"Think I'm gonna let him get away with that new rifle o' mine?" Rosy flared. "I'll grab it away from him and then spin him around the plaza on his ear."

"No, you won't," Johnny retorted. "How could we handle these heifers with you in jail? Sit on him, Slim."

"You can catch him out in the *pozo* sometime," Sweetwater advised, "and work on him there."

"Likely it wasn't Montoya who swiped your saddle gun, Rosy," Johnny suggested. "He'd have somebody else do the job for him. That's his style. Like the time he had Pancho Archuleta jimmy mine at Sandoval's. Bet it wasn't Montoya who cracked down on the Calaveras woman, either."

This last almost shocked the breath from Gonzalez. "Are you mad, señores? Of course it is not Don Ramon who killed La Marta! He was at the hotel in a poker game when it happened. Besides, he would have no dealing with *ladrónes*. He is a very fine—"

"I know," Johnny interrupted bitingly. "He is a very fine caballero. That's what they all say. La Marta told me so herself the other day. She even called him the top caballero in all New Mexico."

Gonzalez squinted through smoke from his cigarette. "You knew La Marta, señor?"

"I had a talk with her," Johnny admitted. "Never mind about what." He wasn't going to drag Josefita's name into this.

The sheriff sighed. "You have made a very sad mistake, señor. It is not wise to insult our best people. And now, since you cannot help me, I shall ride back to my duty."

THE fat man pulled himself to his saddle and rode back toward Santa Fe.

Rosy looked after him with a scowl. "No wonder they never catch any outlaws out here!"

"It's sunup," Ogallala said. "Let's get them heifers started down the trail."

"Wagon's packed," announced Sweetwater. "Includin' that hardware and stuff what was sent out from town." He limped across to the corral for the wagon horses.

The others threw saddles on their mounts. As soon as Sweetwater had the wagon team in traces, Slim opened the corral gate. Five hundred and ten Herefords drifted west down the road.

Sight of them brightened Johnny a little. With a faint, contented lowing the heifers strung out ahead of him, the morning light slanting on sleek red backs. "Anybody tries to rustle 'em," Johnny said, "is in for a fight."

"And me with only a rimfire carbine!" Rosy mourned.

"Take mine," Slim offered. He insisted on trading rifles. "You're the best shot in this here outfit, Rosy."

From the wagon seat Sweetwater remarked hopefully: "Whoever grabbed Rosy's rifle won't have any ca'tridges for it. None for sale out here either, on that new model. So he'll have to send plumb back east to the factory."

"Not till he fires fifty rounds." Rosy's voice was full of gloom. "My

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rifle had sixteen shells in the magazine. And I had about twice that many in a bullet pocket on the saddle scabbard, and they're gone."

He rode to the head of the herd to point the trail.

By noon they were at the Rio Grande and forded there.

"Do we make Sandoval's by night, Johnny?" Slim asked.

"No, Slim. It's a two-day drive from Santa Fe."

"This here's a big country," Slim admitted, looking ahead toward a skyline of mesas.

"Plenty o' room to run cows in," declared Johnny.

They pushed the heifers on and at sundown made camp in an aspen park just under the east rimrock of a mesa. High mountain bluestem was sweet there.

"Look at 'em go after it!" Ogallala chuckled as the cattle spread out to graze.

"It cures with a head just like grain," said Johnny. "Puts plenty o' tallow on a cow's ribs."

"Puts big bones in a calf, too, this mountain grass does," Sweetwater chimed in. "Betcha our calf crop next fall'll weigh four hun'erd pounds each at weanin'."

The night was divided into five watches, each man taking a two-hour turn. "We're not likely to be bothered here, though," Johnny predicted.

ROLLED in blankets under the stars, he breathed in the pine-scented air and wondered just what fate awaited him across these mesas. The warm hospitality of the Sandovals was there, he knew, and beyond that lay the hazards of the *pozo*. Somewhere a bullet with his name on it was waiting for Johnny Cameron.

He considered the prospect calmly. The bullet, he felt certain, would be inspired, but not fired by Montoya. Montoya, the fine caballero! Montoya, who was only waiting for a girl's eighteenth birthday.

"I gotta put a kink in that!" Johnny murmured.

"Put a kink in what?" Slim demanded from the next bedroll.

"In a wedding bell," Johnny said. He told Slim about the baby girl found wrapped in a buffalo robe on the Santa Fe Trail; about her adoption by the Sandovals and her betrothal to Ramon Montoya. "We got less'n three months to work in. If that jigger gets me first, you start in where I leave off, Slim."

"Is she good-lookin'?"

"Makes no difference about that," Johnny retorted. "I mean we can't let him get away with this just by dry-gulchin' the only witness he's afraid of."

Slim nudged Sweetwater. "Did you hear that, Sweetwater? Johnny wants to break up a weddin' and he needs our help."

"Ain't it awful!" gibed Sweetwater. "You wouldn't've thought it of a nice boy like Johnny."

"With all the troubles we got," Slim sighed, "he wants us to start botherin' about a woman."

"When you see her," Johnny retorted, "you'll be the first to begin slickin' back your hair."

"Sure he will," Ogallala put in. "Don't pay any 'tention to them two bowlegged crow baits, Johnny. Now shet yer traps and go to sleep."

In the morning they crossed the mesa and drifted the cattle down into the Springs of the Saint's Soul Grant. Grouse whirred through the timber. Rosy, riding point, flushed a flock of wild turkey.

"It's just like this over in the *pozo*," Johnny assured them. "Game everywhere."

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"That grass is what looks good to me," Slim said. He pointed out toward the Puerco flats where miles of range were dotted with sheep.

Centering it all stood the ancestral hacienda of the Sandovals.

In midafternoon they drew near it. And Johnny saw the entire Sandoval household riding out to meet them. "Mind your manners, you bunk-shack bums," he warned. "These here folks are mighty polite."

A girl came galloping up on a pony. "Hello, Señor Johnny," she called. Her cheeks were red and her long black hair flew behind her in the wind.

"Hi, Josephine," Johnny greeted. "Meet the best-lookin' herd o' cow stuff in New Mex."

"They are all so alike!" Josefita said enthusiastically. "Such pretty heads! How can they be so fat after such a long trail?"

If Josefita was impressed by the Herefords, Slim and Sweetwater were no less impressed by Josefita. Johnny saw them edging up with hats off and sleeking back their hair.

ROSY RYAN, at the head of the herd, was already being greeted by Don Ygnacio and the other Sandovals. Ogallala was driving the wagon this morning. When he rumbled up, Johnny presented his friends to Josefita.

Ogallala was old enough to say what Slim and Sweetwater couldn't. "Johnny's been tellin' us about how purty you was, miss," he told the girl. "We're sure proud to find out he's so truthful, fer once in his life. Is this yer grandpa?"

Don Ygnacio approached them, his small, goateed face beaming. "We are happy you are home again, Señor Cameron." To the others he bowed. "My rancho is yours, caballeros."

Then came Don Santiago with all the nephews and cousins, ranging down to seven-year-olds on burros. Back of these came the house servants as well as numerous sheepherders and vaqueros.

"We are glad you come home, Don Juan," they shouted.

"See what pretty cattle he has brought here!"

"Hear that?" Slim whispered behind his hand to Sweetwater. "They're calling our Johnny names."

Vaqueros took proud charge of the heifers and drove them on toward the corrals. Don Ygnacio wanted to take every man, horse and cow right into his household, but Johnny wouldn't hear of it.

"It wouldn't be right to clutter you up, Don Ygnacio. With your permission we'll just camp on the upper Puerco for a few days, till we get the stuff branded. Naturally, we don't want to turn it loose till we get our iron in it."

Ogallala stopped the wagon by the corral gate and began unloading certain hardware and planking from it. "You don't mind if we rig up a brandin' chute, do yuh?" he asked Don Ygnacio casually. "Don't see any sense in it myself. But Johnny figgers we ought to pamper these heifers."

They were quite welcome, Don Ygnacio said, to build anything they wanted.

Looking over the corral fence, Johnny saw a shabby old man with a flowing white beard. Around him were a dozen little children from the peon quarters. They were holding a milk bottle to the mouth of a baby antelope.

"Hi, Jason," Johnny yelled.

The old prospector shuffled forward, grinning. "Caught a fawn antelope up near my camp," he explained. "Its mammy got clawed by

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a panther. So I fetched the little feller down here fer the kids to play with."

"Any devilment been goin' on over in the *pozo?*" Johnny asked.

"Nope. Quiet as a graveyard over there." Old Jason renewed the cud in his cheek and then squinted from man to man of Johnny's companions. "When you fellers figurin' on goin' over there to file claims?"

"Bright and early tomorrow," Johnny answered. "Soon as we file, we'll come back over here and brand."

"Takin' a chance, ain't yuh?" Jason cautioned. "Leavin' them ballies without a herder while you ride over there to file?"

"We've got to get those claims staked," explained Johnny. "Only take us a day. While we're gone, we'll get Don Ygnacio to put a few of his vaqueros with 'em."

"Reckon that orta make it safe," Jason said. "Well, I got to fork my mule now and be a-ridin'."

No amount of persuasion from Johnny and the Sandovals would induce the old fellow to stay. Mounting his mule, he rode north toward the *pozo* hills.

"Queer old codger," Rosy murmured.

"Yeah; there's a mystery back o' that old beard," Johnny said.

DON YGNACIO readily consented when Johnny explained his plans. "I regret that you will not stay even for supper, señores," he said regretfully. "I myself will show you to good grass on the upper Puerco. And early tomorrow I will send you my three best vaqueros."

Josefita came along, too. She

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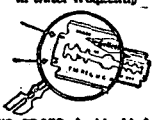
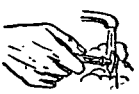
2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently



3. TWO EDGES do the blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both edges one and get extra shaves



4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

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rode with Johnny at the head of the herd as the others trailed it northwest toward an upper corner of the grant.

"I like your friends, Señor Johnny," she confided. "I hope all of them will come to my wedding."

"Montoya passed us on the road," said Johnny. "He was headin' into Santa Fe."

Some brusque quality in his voice made Josefita look at him curiously. "I do not believe you like Don Ramon, señor."

He forced a laugh. "Of course I don't. I'm jealous."

She refused to take this at face value. "Please, Señor Johnny, why do you not like Ramon?"

"I gave you one reason. There's another."

"What is it, señor?"

"If I tell you, you'd be offended."

"Perhaps it is because you have been talking with *el viejo*."

"Old Jason Holt?"

"*Si, señor*. He, too, does not like Ramon. Today he came down to bring a little antelope, but it is only an excuse to see me. He has called me aside and talked to me about Ramon."

"What did he say?"

"*El viejo* is a good man," Josefita said seriously, "but he has lived alone in the hills so long I think maybe he is a little crazy. Today he has told me terrible lies about Ramon and has begged me not to marry him. But of course I will. It has been arranged a long time, and Ramon is a—"

"A very fine caballero," Johnny supplied dryly. "Yeah, everyone says that. Suppose we drop it. I don't want you thinkin' I'm crazy, too."

Don Ygnacio spurred to a place beside them. "*Mira*, Señor Cameron. There is ten thousand acres we do not use for the sheep." He pointed to a wide stretch of vega

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along the upper Puerco. "You must make yourself at home there until your house is built in the *pozo*."

"A thousand thanks," Johnny said.

"I think we had better turn back here, *papacito*," suggested Josefita.

"Come along and have supper in camp with us," Johnny urged.

"I am sorry, señor."

Josefita's voice seemed a bit cool as she turned back with Don Ygnacio toward the hacienda.

CHAPTER XVII

THE EVEN BREAK

THEY made camp in cottonwoods along the Puerco. And again that night each man stood guard in turn over the unbranded cattle.

The first blush of daylight brought three vaqueros from the hacienda. The segundo himself made one of them. The other two struck Johnny as likely to make a better showing in a fandango than in a gun fight. They moved with languor. Their round brown faces, smiling from beneath the wide brims of beehive sombreros, were honest enough. Heavy spurs, chaparajos, wide-striped serapes and brass-studded leather cuffs weighted them down.

You couldn't draw a gun very fast, Johnny thought, in trappings like that. These fellows wore holstered revolvers but carried no saddle rifles.

"Betcha they're handier with a guitar than anything else," Slim murmured.

"What difference does it make," argued Sweetwater Smith. "We'll be back by sundown. We can't file them claims till we see 'em, can we? So let's ride."

"We can trust you not to let the cattle scatter too far, señores," Johnny said.

"But of course, Don Juan," promised the segundo.

"And don't let 'em cross the river," Rosy said. "Looks like a daggone good rustler country over there."

"You may rest easy, señor."

Directly after breakfast, Johnny and his friends took trail for the *pozo hondo*. The way led them into steep, high country heading a fork of the *pozo*.

"Got them filin' blanks, Johnny?" Ogallala asked.

"Yeah, and they're all filled out," Johnny said. "All we gotta do is to tie one to a stake at each of those waterholes. Then we mail duplicates and filin' fees to the land office."

"Get a jog on," Slim urged. "I'd sure hate to get back and find them cow critters raided."

Johnny took the lead and they pushed on another hour up a brushy trail. It led them to a bald plateau with a gap between rocky red shoulders just ahead. "That gap," announced Johnny, "is our front door."

"Nice place to get dry-gulched," Slim suggested.

"Keep your guns limber," advised Ogallala.

Johnny pulled his new .44-40 from the scabbard and held it across his saddle. They advanced then, riding abreast, toward the narrow gap which made a gateway for the *pozo hondo*.

FRENCHY WELSH saw them coming. Well concealed, he was perched high in a crevice of the gap's left shoulder. Atop the shoulder was a thicket of wild cherries. In it was hitched Frenchy's horse, the fastest in the *pozo*.

One shot would do it. That was Frenchy's contract with Montoya. The price had been paid in advance. It was a tip which had netted

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Frenchy nineteen thousand dollars. The money was in his saddlebags right now.

Those fellows were still a good four hundred yards away. Frenchy knew they couldn't ride up here to get him without going a long way around. The face of the shoulder was sheer. And by the time they could scramble up afoot he'd be a long way off.

He waited, setting his sight for one hundred yards. The feel of his centerfire Winchester gave him confidence. He had practiced a few shots with it since pilfering it from a scabbard in Santa Fe, and had been impressed with its performance. At a hundred yards, and with a broad-chested target like Cameron, he couldn't miss.

The others would chase him. Frenchy would have to risk that. If he didn't, Montoya would set a Federal marshal on his heels. Also, Montoya would tell Fadeaway that Frenchy was holding out loot.

Fadeaway and the others would swarm all over him if they knew. They were tough hombres. Right now they were riding to the Puerco to make off with a herd of Herefords, guarded only by a few lazy, slow-fingered vaqueros. Fallon would get away with 'em, all right. By leading off Cameron's buddies and losing them in hills to the north, Frenchy could guarantee Fallon a long start. By then it would be night time. Fallon could push on through darkness and lose his trail in the San Juan.

Frenchy poked the muzzle of the .44-40 through a crack in the rocks. With a steady rest he drew a bead on Johnny Cameron.

Two hundred yards. One hundred and fifty. Frenchy was a shrewd judge of ranges. His angle of fire was downward. Easy to bounce Cameron out of that saddle.

One hundred yards! Frenchy pulled the trigger.

Crack! The hills threw back a hoarse echo. Frenchy saw Cameron pitch to the ground. It was a breast hit, he knew. Frenchy himself scurried up through a notch in the craggy shoulder. They couldn't see him from below. He pressed his way into cherry brush and to the horse there. Jumping to the saddle, he dug in with spurs and was off.

OGALLALA swung to the ground and caught Johnny as he fell. He saw blood spread in a crimson blotch over Johnny's vest.

"We'll get him, kid," Ogallala promised. His voice was savage, but his arms were gentle as he pillowed Johnny's head in them.

Rosy, Slim and Sweetwater were firing at a ball of white smoke which drifted from a crevice of the gap. They hadn't seen the sniper. No way to tell how many men were ambushed there.

"We're wastin' lead," Rosy rasped. "Let's circle and find a way to that brush on top." He galloped up a hillside and Slim followed.

Sweetwater dismounted and came limping to Ogallala. "How bad's he hit?" he asked anxiously.

"Dead center," Ogallala announced grimly. "He ain't conscious, but he's still breathin'. Let's take him to the shade of them aspens."

They carried Johnny to the aspens. There they removed his vest and shirt. The bullet had entered just over the right lung and had emerged at the back, below the shoulder blade. "He's tough," Sweetwater muttered. "He might pull through if I can stop this blood."

He stripped off his own shirt and

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bandaged the wound. Ogallala rolled his coat up for a pillow and they put Johnny's head on it.

Sweetwater found a tiny pool of water standing from the last rain. He filled his hat and came back to bathe Johnny's chest and face. He tried to be hopeful. "The way I figger it, the kid's too tough to let one stinkin' little slug finish him off."

"Sure he is," Ogallala agreed grimly. "You just stay here and take care of him while I go help Rosy and Slim."

"Better let me go," Sweetwater said.

"Nope. I'm the best tracker, Rosy's handy with a gun all right, but he might lose that buzzard's trail."

Sweetwater's eyes smoldered. "When you ketch him, bring his ears back to me."

Ogallala started toward his horse. Then he saw Johnny's empty saddle. The big Spanish gelding was easily the best mount of them all. So Ogallala took Muchacho, leaving his own horse standing there. Carbine out, he galloped up a slope along hoofprints left by Rosy and Slim.

It was a slow, circling climb to wild cherry brush high on the gap's shoulder. Ogallala found Slim and Rosy looking over sign there. "They was only one sniper done it," Rosy announced. "And look! Here's what he done it with." Rosy picked up an empty shell which had been ejected from Frenchy's rifle.

"Centerfire!" Slim and Ogallala exclaimed in a breath.

"Which means," growled Rosy, "that he done it with my rifle! The one he snitched in Santa Fe. That model's too new for this country, 'cept the ones we brought out here."

"Let's go," Slim urged, and swung back on his horse. "He's got twenty minutes' start of us already."

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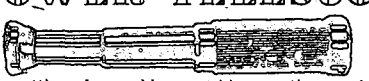

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THE trail was easy to follow. Ogallala took the lead. The killer's horse had crashed through brush, leaving plenty of sign. "He figgers to outrun us," Slim said.

"You fellers turn back and leave him to me," Ogallala insisted.

They wouldn't do it. "He shot Johnny with my rifle," Rosy argued bitterly. "That makes him my meat."

"Besides," Slim put in, "it's a cinch he's headin' fer some more of his own kind. They's supposed to be a whole pack of outlaws in this *pozo*. So three of us ain't too many to shoot it out with 'em."

Ogallala pushed on and his keen, range-trained eyes missed no print or broken twig. Soon they emerged from the brush, and miles of the open *pozo* basin spread out below them.

"There he goes!" Slim yelled. All of them saw a fugitive horse at a hard gallop on the far side of the basin.

"Lay yer ears back, Muchacho," Ogallala said. "We gotta ketch that skunk."

They raced off, Ogallala pulling well ahead of the others. He didn't need to watch hoofprints now. Hoofs thundered as three men followed one in a race to avenge Johnny Cameron.

Then timber on the far slope of the *pozo* swallowed the fugitive. Ogallala pinned his eyes on the spot and kept hard on toward it. Arriving there, he had to begin tracking again. Slim and Rosy caught up as the older man was forcing his way through brush.

"Why the Sam Hill don't you fellers turn back?" Ogallala spoke impatiently over his shoulder.

"Why don't *you?*" Rosy retorted. "I'm turnin' back just as soon as I flip a .44 through that jasper."

"Johnny said for me to carry on in his place if anything happened to him," Slim argued. "Out of my way, Ogallala."

"You'd lose the trail in five minutes," Ogallala shot back. "You know daggone well I'm the best sign finder."

Pushing through glade and canyon on the killer's trail, they continued to wrangle. Each man wanted the other two to turn back. Each wanted to deal retribution himself, with a hail of bullets, to the man ahead.

"'Tain't right to leave Sweetwater alone with Johnny back there," Ogallala fretted. "One of you fellers orter be helpin' him git Johnny down to the Sandoval place. Tother of you orter be foggin' fer a doctor."

The tracks turned up a barranca and came out on a bare, lime-rock bench. The surface of the bench was smooth and hard. It showed no more sign than a concrete pavement.

Ogallala swore. "Take us half a day to find where he cut away from this rock. Which means we can't ketch him afore nightfall. Blast you ornery bums, Johnny'll bleed to death while you're messin' around here."

"Aw right," Slim conceded grudgingly. "We'll match for it. Odd man keeps on after the dry gulcher. The other two ride back to Johnny."

Rosy agreed and produced a coin. The others did likewise and all three flipped at the same time.

"Yours is heads, Rosy," Ogallala crowed. "Yours is, too, Slim. Mine's tails. Now git to heck out o' here, both of you."

A bargain was a bargain. Rosy and Slim turned back.

And Ogallala quickly found where the sign left the limestone bench.

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He did it more with his head than with his eyes. The man would keep as much as possible to the screen of timber. Timber grew only on the upper side of the bench. Riding there, Ogallala lost only a few minutes in finding the trail again. From here it angled up toward the rim of the *pozo*.

SCANNING the rimrock shrewdly, the tracker saw but two possible niches of egress. Both of them, he reasoned, would emerge on a bare mesa. So Ogallala deserted the tracks and made speed toward the nearest of the niches. He didn't care whether or not it was the right one. The fugitive could hardly be more than thirty minutes ahead. And a lead that short would expose him on the open mesa.

Ogallala pushed on up the slope, emerging on the mesa with the sun still about two hours high. A wide, open tableland ahead now. And on the far rim of it Ogallala saw a loping dot. He was off at lathering speed after it, having gained at least ten minutes by deserting the trail.

Muchacho was blowing hard. It was a punishing gait for him. But Ogallala knew the fugitive horse would be no less winded. "It's you agin' him, Muchacho," Ogallala encouraged the chestnut. "Keep a-lopin'."

At the far edge of the mesa the fugitive stopped, whirled his mount and whipped a rifle to his cheek. Ogallala saw a puff of smoke, then heard the rifle bark. He didn't waste a precious minute to fire back. "We'll have him cornered afore sundown, Muchacho. Leastwise, he dassent stop to feed. I figger that bronc's got good legs, all right. But he ain't got a chest on him like yourn, old hoss."

The man ahead dipped down over the far rimrock. When Ogallala arrived there he could hear a horse crashing through timber below. Ogallala jumped Muchacho down a stair-step niche in the cliff and went smashing after him. The sun was setting, but there'd still be an hour of light. No rest for that fellow.

"Ride him down, Muchacho!" Ogallala cried.

The fugitive broke out upon a barren hogback and raced hard for the nose of it. He twisted in his saddle to shoot and the bullet whis-

tled over Ogallala's head. The wiry little rangeman took his own rifle from the boot. His thin, blizzard-bit face, as wise as a starved owl's, at the same time revealed the tight-toothed tenacity of a pit bulldog. "He can't shake us off. Muchacho."

With each stride Muchacho was gaining. Sweat lathered his flanks and his breath came like a bellows. Another bullet whirred from the fugitive. "He can't hit nothin'," Ogallala muttered, "ridin' like that."

They raced off the hogback and

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down into a cottonwood bottom. The fugitive disappeared from sight and Ogallala heard him splash through a creek. Then the hoofbeats stopped. Presumably the man had dismounted to take a post of defense back of trees.

OGALLALA drew Muchacho to a quick halt. Dropping reins to the ground, the old trailsman advanced on foot with his rifle. The shadows were long as he stalked in among the cottonwoods. A gun roared beyond the creek; its bullet chipped bark from a tree by Ogallala. He dropped to his stomach and crawled on like an Indian.

He could see the other man's horse beyond the creek. Then he saw a rifle barrel poking through brush. Ogallala rolled to one side just as it flashed. He was behind willows now. He stood up and made his way downstream, screened by the willows. Then he waded the stream and circled to a position back of his man.

In the gloom Ogallala had him covered before the man knew he was there.

"Throw down yer gun and h'ist 'em!" Ogallala plowed sod between Frenchy's legs with a bullet.

The outlaw dropped his gun. He got sullenly to his feet and raised his hands.

Ogallala came up and took a .45 from Frenchy's holster. Then he picked up a Winchester rifle.

"Lie flat on yer belly," Ogallala ordered, "while I get a tie rope on yuh."

When Frenchy didn't obey promptly, Ogallala kicked his shins and the outlaw dropped flat. Ogallala took a rope from the saddle of the horse standing there. With it he tied the man securely.

"Now set up and let's talk," he suggested. "How much did Montoya pay yuh fer this job o' dry-gulchin'?"

"What dry-gulchin'?" Frenchy retorted. "Blast you, you can't pin nothin' on me!" He cursed his captor and then compressed his lips stubbornly.

Ogallala took a look through the saddlebags on the outlaw's horse and found a fat roll of money. Counting it, he whistled. The money came to exactly nineteen thousand dollars.

"I reckon yuh didn't steal this centerfire Winchester from Rosy Ryan, neither!"

"I found it on the range," Frenchy asserted.

Ogallala did some shrewd figuring. Nineteen thousand dollars happened to be exactly half of the loot taken from the murdered Calaveras woman. It was a murder which had occurred on the same night this .44-40 had been stolen from Rosy in Santa Fe. The answer seemed to be that this was the murderer, and that an equal partner in the crime had the other half of the loot.

When he explained this reasoning to Frenchy, blood drained from the man's face. Ogallala saw beads of sweat on his brow.

"You're too ornery to use up a good slug on," Ogallala declared. "So I reckon I got to drag you in to be hanged."

The pallor deepened on Frenchy's face. "Don't take me in," he begged. "If you'll let me go I'll give yuh every cent of that money."

"Which I already got my hands on," Ogallala said. "Come again, you mangy coyote. What else you got to trade with?"

"I ain't got nothin'. I ain't done nothin'. I found that money in Burro Alley."

"If you'll spill the dirt on Mon-

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toya," Ogallala sparred, "I might give yuh an even break."

"I don't know Montoya."

Ogallala tied him hand and foot to a cottonwood. Then crossing the creek, he retrieved Muchacho. After unsaddling both horses, he watered them and staked them out to graze. Then he built a fire and squatted by it, squinting across it at his prisoner.

DARK had fallen. From far down the creek an owl hooted.

"You're plumb skeered o' this Montoya, I reckon," Ogallala said finally. "Is that why yuh won't spiel on him?"

"I don't know him," Frenchy insisted.

Ogallala baited him for half an hour, but could get no admission about Montoya.

"Aw right. Then it looks like yuh ain't got nothin' to trade," Ogallala declared. "Soon as the broncs is rested, I'll pack you in to the sheriff."

Again the owl hooted down the creek.

"Too bad you won't talk," Ogallala said sadly. "'Cause if yuh was to tell me anything right interestin', and it sounded convincin', I'd give yuh an even break."

"Whatta yuh mean, an even break?"

"I'd cut yuh loose, put yer .45 in yer holster and keep mine in mine. Then next time that owl hoots, we could both go fer our guns."

Frenchy's eyes flickered. But he licked his pale lip and said nothing.

"An even break's better'n no break at all," Ogallala baited. "Know anythin' interestin'? Time's short." He looked at his watch. "I'll give yuh just five minutes to make a deal."

The minutes ticked by. The strain of them finally broke Frenchy.

"For an even break," he said

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hoarsely, "I could tell yuh about a cow steal. I ain't got nothin' to do with it, understand."

"A cow steal, huh? If it's important enough, and sounds convincin', it's a deal," Ogallala agreed. "You got one minute left."

"Aw right. Them heifers o' yourn are bein' run west to Arizona right now."

Ogallala blinked. Instantly he was convinced because it was all so logical. In a flash he understood that the sniping of Cameron had been to lure them in a long chase across the mountains north, giving time for the rest of the *pozo* gang to drive cattle west from the Puerco.

"When did this cow steal start?" he demanded.

"Early this morning," answered Frenchy. "Just as soon as you got out o' sight an' sound. Do I get that even break?"

"I allers keep a promise," Ogallala said, "even to a skunk like you."

He used his knife to cut Frenchy free. Then he stuck a .45 in the man's holster. Ogallala's gun was still in its holster.

The fire blazed between them. "Wait till the owl hoots," Ogallala said. "Then go fer yer gun."

He knew the man wouldn't wait. He'd be sure to snatch for an advantage by beating the owl's hoot. So Ogallala kept his eyes on a slowly clawing right hand.

When it dared to a holster, Ogallala drew and fired. Frenchy stiffened. Then he pitched forward across the fire, dead-centered between the eyes.

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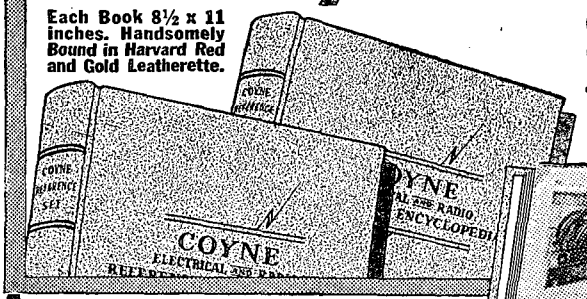

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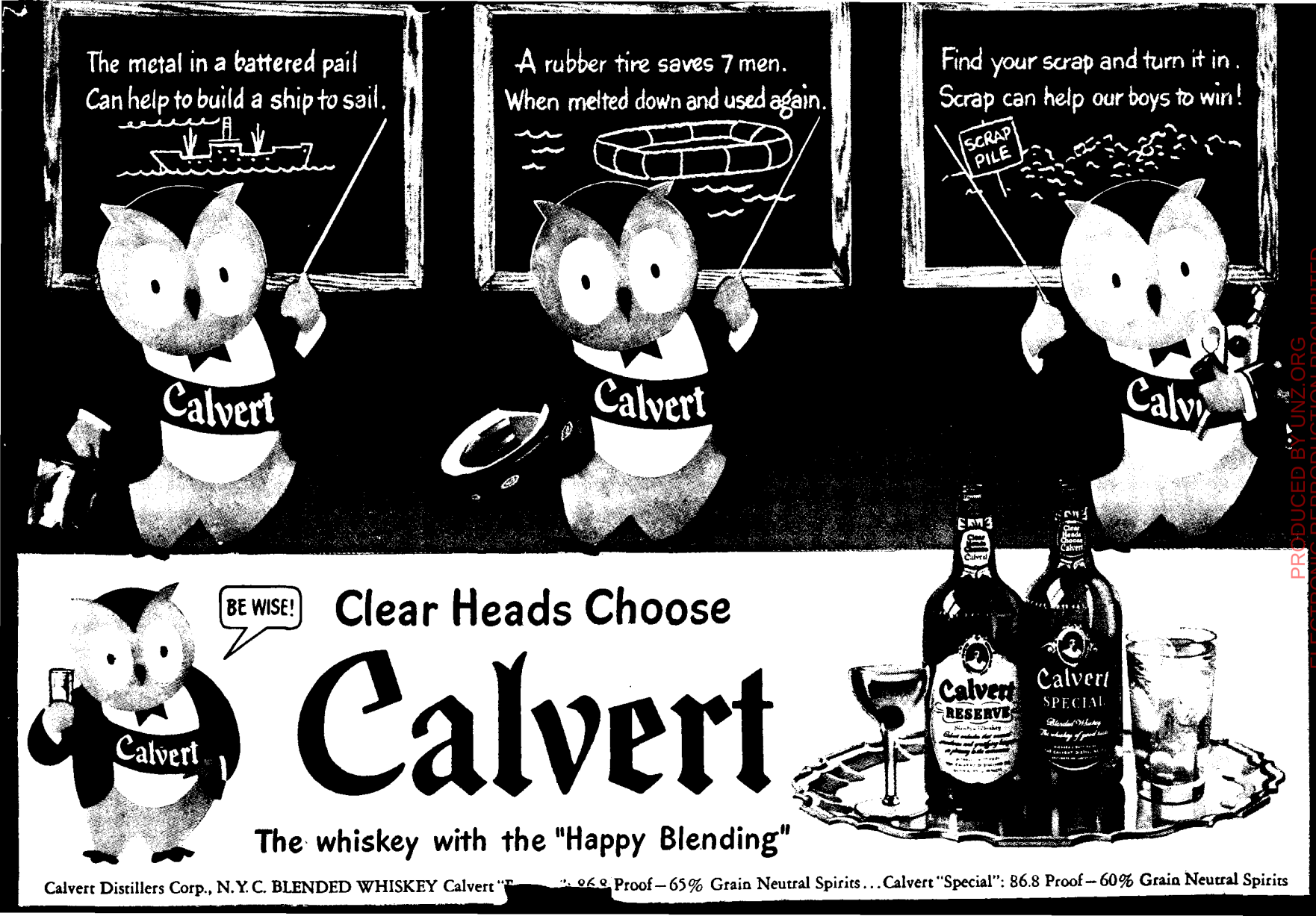

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